Vittorino da Feltre
and Other Humanist Educators

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With a Foreword by
EUGENE F. RICE, JR.

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VITTORINO DA FELTRE
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By William Harrison Woodward
Foreword by Eugene F. Rice, Jr.

Foreword

By EUGENE F. RICE, JR.

The humanist idea of education is among the permanently influential legacies of the Italian Renaissance. Four short Latin treatises published between 1400 and 1460 define it admirably: Pier Paolo Vergerio's *De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus adolescentiae studiis;* Leonardo Bruni's *De studiis et literis;* the *De liberorum educatione* of Aeneas Sylvius, who later became Pope Pius II; and Battista Guarino's *De ordine docendi et studendi.* Translated into English by William Harrison Woodward and framed, on the one hand, by his description of the famous school founded by Vittorino da Feltre in 1424 at the court of Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, marquis of Mantua, and, on the other, by a judiciously balanced analysis of the aims and methods of the humanist educators, these important texts form the heart of a book that has remained for almost seventy years the fundamental study of early Renaissance educational theory and practice.

When Renaissance humanists wrote about education, they

wrote as professionals. To be sure, not every humanist was a pedagogue. A very few, like Petrarch, managed to support themselves as independent men of letters; a few—the great Venetian printer Aldus Manutius is an example—were scholarly editors and publishers; others were civil servants, who combined research and writing with jobs as secretaries in the chancelleries of Rome, Naples and the cities and principalities of central and northern Italy. But more humanists earned their living by teaching than in any other way. Their very name confirms this. For the word *humanista*, or humanist, was coined toward the end of the fifteenth century to designate members of a particular professional group: teachers of subjects variously described in Renaissance texts as literature (*studia litterarum*); the good, human or liberal arts (*bonae artes*, *humanae artes*, *artes liberales*); or, most frequently and expressively, the humanities (*studia humanitatis*).

Humanitas is a classical word and a classical idea. From it have come, not only *humanista*, but also "humanism" (a term first used by German scholars in the early nineteenth century to denote an educational theory based on the Greek and Latin classics) and, by way of the meaning Renaissance teachers attached to the phrase *studia humanitatis*, our present conception of the "humanities." Cicero used it to translate the Greek *paideia*, education or culture. The second-century grammarian Aulus Gellius defined it as "knowledge and instruction in the good arts" (*eruditio institutioque in bonas artes*). Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanists revived the word. "To each species of creatures," wrote Battista Guarino, "has been allotted a peculiar and instinctive gift. To horses galloping, to birds flying, comes naturally. To man only is given the desire to learn. Hence what the Greeks called παιδεία we call 'studia humanitatis.' For learning and training in Virtue are peculiar to man;

therefore our forefathers called them *Humanitas*, the pursuits, the activities proper to mankind."

So comprehensive a purpose—to perfect the individual in wisdom (*sapientia*), learning (*doctrina*) and virtue (*scientia moralis*)—would seem, theoretically, to demand an encyclopedic curriculum. Cicero, after all, had defined wisdom as "knowledge of all things divine and human and their causes"; and Vittorino da Feltre himself, reports his fifteenth-century biographer Bartolomeo Platina, "used to praise that universal learning that the Greeks call ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία [from *kyklos*, circle or orbe, and *paideia*, and so an all-embracing education], saying that to benefit his fellows the perfect man should be able to discuss natural philosophy, ethics, the motion of the stars, geometry, harmony, arithmetic and surveying." In practice, however, the subject matter of the *studia humanitatis* was more limited. Humanistic writing shows a fairly consistent pattern of intellectual interests: grammars, poems, orations and histories; letters, plays and biographies; learned editions of literary and historical texts; dialogues and essays on moral philosophy. Humanist teaching shows the same pattern. A humanist did not teach everything; he was a specialist. When teaching his subject professionally, whether publicly or privately, he taught the Latin and Greek languages and literatures, history and moral philosophy. These were the "good and liberal arts," which were counted on to make men learned and virtuous. The same arts define the content of the *studia humanitatis* and the basic curriculum of a humanist school.

The very limitations of this curriculum reflect a new educational purpose: to produce free and civilized men, men of virtue and taste, with a sense of beauty, rather than professionally trained doctors, lawyers, merchants, philosophers or theologians. In the Middle Ages education had been at once professional and clerical. Formal education

—in the sense of the transmission of knowledge through the systematic study of literary, philosophical, legal and scientific texts—was largely a clerical monopoly. The medieval university had neglected the layman; his training, at home or in town or guild schools, was narrowly functional. Since, for example, it was the social function of nobles to fight, they were taught the rudiments of religion, the aristocratic ideals of their class—those notions of courage, honor and *noblesse oblige* which we call chivalry—and, above all, how to fight on horseback in heavy armor, none of which necessarily involved learning how to read and write. Merchants and a growing number of craftsmen were literate, but the purpose of literacy was trade, not sweetness and light. The aim of a humanist education, on the other hand, was to embellish the leisure and fortify the virtue of that approximately 2 per cent of the population of the Italian city-states who controlled the levers of political and economic power. It was more civic and more secular than in the past: civic because the aim was to train citizens rather than monks or scholars, secular because the aim was to train laymen rather than priests and to train them in literary and philosophical disciplines that had been formerly a clerical preserve. Inevitably, it was also classical. For by using the term *humanitas* to name their highest intellectual and moral ideal, Renaissance humanists consciously identified Cicero's admiration for the cultural achievements of the Greeks with their own renewed delight in the arts and letters of antiquity, condemned their own more recent past as a "dark age," and polemically announced a reform of education based on the critical and historical study of ancient literature renascent after centuries of alleged barbarism and decay.

Humanist theorists of the first half of the fifteenth century constantly emphasize the civic end of education. "Respecting the general place of liberal studies," says Vergerio, after

reviewing the principal subjects taught in a proper school, "we remember that Aristotle would not have them absorb the entire interests of life: for he kept steadily in view the nature of man as a citizen, an active member of the State. For the man who has surrendered himself absolutely to the attractions of Letters or of speculative thought follows, perhaps, a self-regarding end and is useless as a citizen or as a prince." Human beings are capable of action and contemplation. They must pursue both in order to bring distinction to their family and city and to earn for themselves "fame and honor in the world." A man whose interests are purely scholarly or professional is a tree without fruit. Action in the world should be the end of contemplative scholarship, as art and letters should be the recreation of civilized leisure. Vittorino quoted Cicero to prove the point: "*virtutis laus omnis in actione consistat*"; and Aeneas Sylvius reminded his readers that Cicero had reproached Sextus Pompey for spending too much time on geometry: "His reason was that the true praise of men lies in *doing*, and that consequently all ingenious trifling, however harmless in itself, which withdraws our energies from fruitful activity, is unworthy of the true Citizen."

This is why humanist educators stressed eloquence, that is, grammar and rhetoric, rather than logic; moral philosophy rather than science and metaphysics; and gave to history so novel an importance. For rhetoric, ethics and history are disciplines of doing uniquely appropriate for training scholar-citizens. Moral philosophy teaches us "the secret of true freedom." It teaches us that man is free, like Hercules at the crossroads, to choose the path of virtue or that of vice; it teaches us self-knowledge, practical wisdom, and our duties to God, family, friends, country and ourselves; and it draws us from the abstract preoccupations of natural philosophy and metaphysics into the world of human

action. History gives us concrete examples of the precepts inculcated by philosophy. The one shows what men should do, the other what men have said and done in the past and what practical lessons we may draw for the present day. Finally, eloquence is indispensable, not only because formal and stylistic beauty is pleasurable in itself, but also because it persuades our fellow citizens to follow the lessons of history and the precepts of philosophy in their private and public lives.

Humanist emphasis on physical training reflects a similar civic and human purpose: specifically, to train the citizen in arms so that he "may be found ready to defend [his city's] rights or to strike a blow for honor or power"; more generally, to develop fully all an individual's capacities, strength and grace of body as well as intellectual and moral vigor. An age which redefined happiness, with Aristotle, to include money, beauty and health as well as virtue; which redefined wisdom, with the Stoics, to include knowledge of human as well as divine things; which, for the first time since antiquity, used the nude to express its image of perfect beauty—such an age was inevitably concerned to educate body as well as mind, to prize as peculiarly liberal and humane the harmonious cultivation of every admirable human potentiality. The training of aristocratic boys in riding and fighting, which in the Middle Ages had had a strictly professional purpose, acquired a new and more general significance when fifteenth-century schoolmasters made gymnastics and organized sports an integral part of a liberal education. Until the sixteenth century this sporting emphasis could be found only in Italy. In England, where sport was ultimately to bulk so large in the ideal of the gentleman, football was considered base and mean. In Florence, it was played by the sons of the patriciate, and it was said "to make the body sound, dexterous and robust and to make the mind

awake, sharp and desirous of virtuous victory." Therefore, said Vergerio, as soon as a boy is able to use his limbs, "let him be trained in arms; so soon as he can rightly speak, let him be trained in letters." Men, to be sure, have different aptitudes. Some will excel in arms, others in letters. But the perfect man, just as he cultivates both intellectual and moral virtues and combines the contemplative and active lives, excels in both. A favorite subject of Renaissance painting was the loves of Mars and Venus. The pictorial message was also the ideal of humanist education: the necessary and desirable coexistence of speculation and war, contemplation and service to the state, *humanitas* and physical excellence.

Such a conception of man, the humanist believed, found its highest expression in ancient literature. A humanist education, therefore—aside from the fact that Latin was the indispensable language of the church, diplomacy, scholarship and the professions of law and medicine—was necessarily classical and literary. Study of letters meant study of Latin letters. Latin, and later Greek, literature was the core of education because, as Erasmus bluntly put it in the sixteenth century, "within these two literatures is contained all the knowledge which we recognize as of vital importance to mankind." Ancient literature was the voice itself of *humanitas*, the civilizing force which made man free and whole, refined his sensibility and molded his moral attitudes. A man was liberally educated who had achieved self-knowledge through an accurate understanding of ancient literature, whose imagination was stirred by the ideal pattern of classical humanity, who modeled his life after the image of man in the Greek and Latin classics in the same way that Scipio and Caesar had kept before their eyes the image of Alexander. Indeed, the idea of *humanitas* itself suggested the claims that a classical education was peculiarly

human, that it, pre-eminently, civilized the rude and uncultured, that it made a human being more fully and more perfectly a man. "We call those studies liberal," wrote Vergerio in a seminal passage, "which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains and develops those highest gifts of body and of mind [honor and glory] which ennoble men, and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only." Classical studies free, civilize and perfect.

Such a commitment implied no necessary blunting of Christian zeal. It did pose acutely the problem of reconciling Christian values with the humanist's enthusiasm for heathen literatures, whose fundamentally secular assumptions were increasingly revealed as knowledge of antiquity became more accurate, critical and historically sophisticated. Humanist educators offered an initial solution by coupling their enthusiasm for pagan antiquity with a parallel emphasis on Christian antiquity, by embracing the whole of ancient letters, pagan literature and the writings of the Church Fathers in a comprehensive admiration.

Leonardo Bruni underlined the significance of the Church Fathers for education in a key passage: "True learning has almost died away amongst us. True learning, I say: not a mere acquaintance with that vulgar, threadbare jargon which satisfies those who devote themselves to Theology, but sound learning in its proper and legitimate sense, viz., the knowledge of realities—Facts and Principles—united to a perfect familiarity with Letters and the art of expression. Now this combination we find in Lactantius, in Augustine, or in Jerome; each of them at once a great theologian and profoundly versed in literature." These sentences are a manifesto: an attack on medieval learning and scholastic

theology, a justification of the *studia humanitatis*, an assertion that true learning has a double source, classical literature and patristic theology.

For the Fathers, in the humanist view, were themselves classical men of letters. By reading and quoting Homer and Virgil, Plato and Cicero, they sanctioned the study of pagan literature and philosophy by the moderns. Several had written poetry; several more ranked in style and eloquence with the greatest of their pagan contemporaries and predecessors. By contrast, the religious writings of the scholastics, wrote Bruni, "are utterly destitute of sound and melodious style, and seem to me to have no attraction whatever." Nor was it simply a question of style. Humanist educators considered patristic theology more appropriate for the religious training of the young than the arrogant subtleties, in their view, of scholastic theological science. By combining the purity and simplicity of the early church with a sophisticated literary culture, the Fathers had created an "eloquent wisdom" and a "learned piety." Therefore, they were the most appropriate models for Christian eloquence and Christian philosophy, for a holy rhetoric simpler and more moving than the crabbed and Gothic "questions" of the schoolmen, for a piety stripped of the factitious complexity of dialectic and closer to the scriptural text. In patristic literature humanists found a Christian vision of antiquity. The Fathers had reconciled the tension between Christianity and the ideals of classical culture. Their example convinced humanist educators that they could do the same.

The principles of the fifteenth-century Italian humanist educators were restated with only minor shifts of emphasis by Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives, the greatest educational theorists of the sixteenth century, and took firm institutional form in the secondary schools, both Catholic and

Protestant, of the early modern period. They remained the dominant ideal of education until the end of the nineteenth century. When Woodward, writing in England in the 1890's, subtitled his book "An Introduction to the History of Classical Education," he clearly assumed that he was describing the origins of modern education, or, as he put it himself, the "educational practice of a period whose originating impulse is still, within that sphere, powerfully operative among us." And he was right. The educational treatises of Vergerio, Bruni, Aeneas Sylvius and Battista Guarino, and related humanist works, are the sources of the modern notions of the humanities, of belles-lettres and of a liberal education. Renaissance humanists created the modern idea of the gentleman, whose nobility is conferred by virtue and learning, in short, by education in the *studia humanitatis*, rather than by birth; of training the whole man, both in sport and in the Greek and Roman classics; of an education at once civic and nonprofessional with its inevitable function of civilizing and perpetuating a leisured ruling class. Our difficulty today (and this is why we read Woodward's book with a perspective very different from his) is that these ideas are modern no longer. Like the men of the Renaissance, we live in a period of profound and rapid transition, a period in which most Renaissance values are in a state of disintegration or transformation. This is as true of education as it is of the sovereign state, of capitalism, of Newtonian science and of an art based on perspective. Specifically, the conviction that much, to say nothing of Erasmus' "all," of what is best and vitally important to mankind can be found in the texts of classical antiquity is shared by a diminishing band. The undermining of this fundamental assumption has drained the idea of liberal education of its traditional meaning. But by understanding what humanistic education meant in its historical origins and what cultural and social

needs it was designed to meet, we can perhaps decide on more adequate evidence whether it has become a historical curiosity or whether, and to what extent, its traditional principles and ambitions can be given new meanings appropriate to our own society and to our own sense of what a civilized man should be. For this purpose no book is better than Woodward's scholarly and therapeutic study.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Woodward's versions are in many passages paraphrases rather than translations. The original texts are best read in critical editions published since he wrote: Vergerio's, edited by A. Gnesotto, in *Atti e Memorie della R. Acc. di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti in Padova*, N.S. XXXIV (1918), 96–146; Bruni's, edited by H. Baron, in *Leonardo Bruni Aretino humanistisch, philosophische Schriften* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1928), pp. 5–19; Aeneas Sylvius', in R. Wolkan's edition of the letters of Pius II, *Fontes Rerum Austriacarum. Diplomataria et Acta*, LXVII (Vienna, 1912), 103–158 or, in the text and translation of Brother J. S. Nelson (Washington, D.C., 1940). There is as yet no modern edition of Battista Guarino's *De ordine docendi et studendi*. A fifth important educational treatise by an Italian humanist of the first half of the fifteenth century is the *De educatione liberorum et eorum claris moribus* of Maffeo Vegio (1407–1458). It is conveniently available in a modern edition by Sisters M. W. Fanning and A. S. Sullivan, in The Catholic University of America, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Latin*, I, fasc. 1 and 2 (Washington, D.C., 1933–1936). E. Garin, *L'educazione umanistica in Italia* (Bari, Italy, 1949) is a valuable collection of texts, with commentary, which usefully supplements Woodward with documents on the life and educational

methods of Vittorino and with selections from Salutati, St. Bernardino of Siena, Matteo Palmieri, Leon Battista Alberti, Guarino Veronese and Antonio de Ferrariis. More valuable still is *Il pensiero pedagogico dello Umanesimo*, edited by Garin (Florence, 1958), a second collection of texts that includes the Latin originals as well as Italian translations. Bartolomeo Platina's life of Vittorino da Feltre has been translated and republished by G. Biasuz (Padua, 1948). Two other major sources for the early history of the new education are the letters of Guarino Veronese, edited by R. Sabbadini, in *Miscellanea di Storia Veneta*, Vols. VIII, XI, XIV (Venice, 1915–1919) and those of Vergerio, edited by L. Smith (Rome, 1934).

Since the publication of Woodward's *Vittorino da Feltre* (Cambridge, England, 1897) and his *Studies in Education during the Age of the Renaissance, 1400–1600* (Cambridge, England, 1906), the best general works on the educational theory and practice of the Italian humanists have been G. Saitta, *L'educazione dell' Umanesimo in Italia* (Venice, 1928) and Garin, *L'educazione in Europa (1400–1600)* (Bari, Italy, 1957), a stimulating synthesis by a master of the sources. Readers who care to explore further will find useful the following more specialized studies: G. Bertoni, *Guarino da Verona fra letterati e cortigiani a Ferrara (1429–1460)* (Geneva, 1921); A. Gambara, *Vittorino da Feltre* (Turin, Italy, 1946); V. J. Horkan, *Educational Theories and Principles of Maffeo Vegio* (Washington, D.C., 1953); and R. Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, Ill., 1956).

Our understanding of the humanist idea of education is, of course, influenced by our interpretation of Renaissance humanism as a whole. Several recent interpretative and bibliographical studies are helpful guides through the maze of controversial literature: P. O. Kristeller and J. H. Randall, Jr., "The Study of the Philosophies of the