

# Humanism as translation

Martin Spence discusses the Renaissance humanists.

The previous issue of *Sofia* took as its theme ‘translation’. I would like to pick up on the theme by exploring the association between translation – in its familiar guise as translation between languages – and humanism. ‘Humanism’ is a contested, and much abused, term. Sometimes it is used to refer to any philosophical or religious stance which privileges ‘humanity’, as opposed to ‘divinity’ or ‘nature’. Sometimes it is pushed further down this road to become a synonym for atheism or secularism, ‘against religion’ and ‘for science’. And sometimes it gets confused with humanitarianism, and morphs into a vaguely benign moralism.

Of course, ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ are just words, and like all words they are subject to change over time. The meanings of words can shift; words have histories. And yet: problems do arise when these histories are simply ignored. Problems arise when long-established terms are treated as if they were newly-coined, as if they were empty verbal vessels into which some entirely new meaning can simply be dropped. This is what has happened with ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’.

The term ‘humanist’ dates back to the Renaissance. It appeared in the fifteenth century, and was in common use by the sixteenth century. It derives from *studia humanitatis*, or ‘human studies’, a loosely-defined programme of linguistic, literary and historical research inspired by a new determination to go *ad fontes*, ‘back to the sources’, by translating ancient texts. Humanists were scholars, historians, philologists (i.e. students of language) and translators.

The Renaissance saw phenomenal creativity in architecture, painting, sculpture and scientific investigation, some of it entirely innovative, and some (for instance in architecture and sculpture) inspired by ancient Greece and Rome. The humanists were part of this creative ferment. Some of them, just like the architects and

sculptors, were enthusiasts for the classical pagan past: Petrarch, often credited as the ‘first humanist’, wrote letters to Cicero and Virgil as if they were personal friends, despite the fact that they’d been dead for hundreds of years. But other humanists were just as passionately enthusiastic about the Christian and Jewish past. When Christian Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, refugees flooded into Italy bringing with them thousands of old manuscripts in Greek and Hebrew, to the point where Italy contained more ancient Christian and Biblical texts than classical Roman texts. But all were grist to the humanist mill.

These humanists were not therefore atheists or agnostics, but scholars and translators. They were defined not by a particular body of belief, but by a particular body of practices. Those practices had a major impact on Christian faith, but it was felt within, rather than against, that faith.

## Humanism and faith

The main institutions of learning at this time were the Church itself, and the universities which were closely tied to the Church. They taught a traditional, essentially medieval curriculum, which had no place for new-fangled studies such as history or philology, the subjects which animated the humanists. Those with private means financed their own researches, while others found work as printers and publishers, or as advisers or counsellors in princely courts.

Perhaps the fact that humanists tended to distance themselves from the Church has contributed to the notion that humanism as such was hostile to Christianity or religion. But this is a misunderstanding: the reason for the distance was not the Church’s religion, but its institutional conservatism.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, Europe's best-known humanist scholar in the sixteenth century, illustrates the point. He believed that scripture should not be blindly accepted, but should be interrogated like any other text, precisely because it was scripture. Its divine spirit would only be correctly grasped, he argued, if the words themselves were correctly interpreted. Otherwise, the faith of believers might be led astray by the mistakes of 'an unskilled or drowsy copyist'. He insisted that the proper response to a difficult Biblical text was to examine and unpick it, and he ridiculed the Church for its lazy invocation of 'allegory' whenever it was confronted with a bit of scriptural awkwardness. And yet he chose to remain a Catholic, and regarded his humanist scholarship as an expression of his faith.

Others made different choices. Both Luther and Calvin had humanist training, and both rooted their rejection of Catholic teaching in their close readings of scripture. To this extent, the Protestant Reformation started as a humanist exercise: the reformers went 'back to the sources', back to the original Biblical text, in order to compare and contrast the unvarnished austerity of the words with the grubby and compromised reality of the Church's day-to-day habits. And as the Reformation unfolded and exploded across Europe, it popularised humanist practice by exploiting the new technology of print. Anyone who could read was invited to participate. Luther became a best-selling author. William Tyndale was the first to translate the New Testament from the original Greek and 14 books of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew into English.

There was therefore a relationship between humanism and the Reformation – but that did not mean that humanism as such was Protestant. As stressed above, it was defined not by faith, but by practice, and its practice was available to anyone. We saw that Erasmus reconciled his humanism with his Catholicism; he stuck with the Church as the Reformation raged around him. And he was not alone. The Jesuits were founded in the mid-sixteenth century as a hothouse of humanist practice at the heart of Catholicism, absorbing and contributing to its practices and putting them at the service of the Church.



Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), by Holbein.  
In 1516 he published his scholarly edition of the Greek New Testament alongside his own new Latin translation and notes.

## Humanism and history

Humanist scholarship was therefore a key element in both the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and as such a key element in the making of European culture since the sixteenth century. This alone would be a mighty legacy. But there's more, for the humanists also bequeathed to us our sense of history itself.

Let's go back to Erasmus with his 'unskilled or drowsy copyist'. Humanist practice was driven by an awareness that the texts which existed in their time, including those whose content was held to be divinely inspired, were nevertheless human artefacts. And as human artefacts, they were unreliable. For more than a thousand years, holy scripture had been preserved by being copied and re-copied, time and again, by hand, from one manuscript to another, all of them fragile and perishable and subject to decay.

But the copyists, monks or clerks labouring through heat and cold and poor light, were only human. The fact that they believed they were transcribing the word of God was no guarantee that they would do so accurately, or that the version they were working from was itself an accurate copy of its own predecessor. Errors, whether accidental, or stemming from a well-meant but mistaken attempt to correct some previous error, inevitably crept in.

The principle of going ‘back to the sources’ reflected the humanists’ awareness of this mundane human capacity for error. By going back to the earliest possible version of any given text, they hoped to get ‘behind’ these errors of copying; to get as close as possible to the original text, and therefore the original meaning. This commitment to translation and interpretation was therefore partly a technical matter of provenance and accuracy. But it also signalled a new historical sensibility. Renaissance humanism was not just about getting the translations right, it also brought with it a new sense of the human past.

The Renaissance sense of the past is often characterised as a ‘rediscovery’ of classical antiquity. But classical antiquity had never been forgotten. In the east, before its fall in the mid-fifteenth century, Constantinople offered unbroken continuity with the Roman Empire, a theologically-obsessive fusion of church and state. In the west the Catholic Church represented a different form of continuity, offering imperial legitimacy to post-imperial Germanic rulers such as Charlemagne in the ninth century or Otto in the tenth.

Classical antiquity was not therefore forgotten, but before the Renaissance its memory took the form of myth rather than history. Imperial Rome was remembered as a golden age of power and order, which might be invoked by a medieval king in search of borrowed glory, but which could never be matched. It was an age of heroes and wonders, of great figures such as Julius Caesar, bestriding and dominating the world in ways which were unthinkable for the lesser mortals of later times.

But with Renaissance humanism, this mythical antiquity started to be re-imagined as history. The Roman Empire started to be understood as a human enterprise, a society made by ordinary mortals, living their brief lives in different

circumstances, and separated from the present not by a mythical gulf but rather by a comprehensible historical distance. It was this historical sensibility which inspired Petrarch to draft his letters of friendship to Cicero and Virgil, long-dead figures whom he admired not as demigods but as human individuals just like himself. This is not to say that humanists like Petrarch had already arrived at a modern sense of history – but they opened the door which made it possible.

## Conclusions

The legacy of Renaissance humanist scholars continues to shape our intellectual world today. They pioneered academic practices which we take for granted: close textual reading; awareness of the provenance of documents; awareness of documents themselves as human artefacts, and thus potentially vehicles of error or falsehood; and consequently, awareness of translation as an interpretive, not merely a technical, exercise.

They gave us our contemporary notion of ‘the humanities’, academic disciplines defined by their focus on human culture and society, from anthropology and history to linguistics and literary studies. Today’s ‘humanities’ can trace a direct line of descent to the *studia humanitatis* of the Renaissance humanists. And they opened the door to a modern sense of history: a sense of the world as an arena of human activity; a sense of humans in different ages and places as united by our shared humanity, and therefore comprehensible to each other; and a sense of our collective activity in the world unfolding through time in a meaningful way.

As we saw at the outset, other meanings have also been attributed to humanism in recent decades: its association with atheism and scientific positivism, or with a vaguely benign moralism. These meanings are now out in the world, and we cannot undo or unlearn them. But alongside these new meanings, we can at least try to retain a sense of humanism’s deeper and original meaning, which reaches back more than half a millennium. The Renaissance humanists helped to shape our intellectual, philosophical and religious world. They left us a rich legacy. Surely they deserve to be remembered and celebrated for it.

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