

The Renaissance, and The Rediscovery And the

by Torbjörn Jerlerup

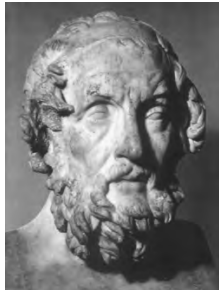


Domenico di Michelino, "Dante Alighieri Reading His Poem," 1465 (detail). The Cathedral of Florence, topped by Brunelleschi's Dome, appears to Dante's left.

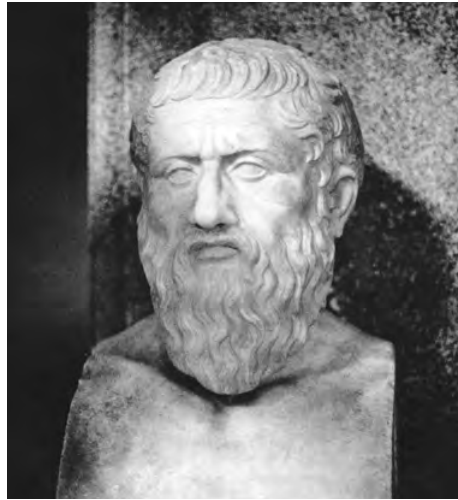
Great minds of ancient Greece (clockwise from top): Homer, Plato, Solon, Aeschylus, Sophocles.

It was in the Midland between the famous rivers Po and Ticino and Adda and others, whence some say our Milan derives its name, on the ninth day of October, in the year of this last age of the world the 1360th.”¹

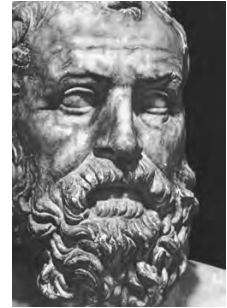
For the people who lived in the Italian city of Milan or in one of its surrounding villages, it might have looked like an ordinary, but cold, autumn morning. It was Friday. The city council and the bishop of Milan were probably quarrelling about the construction of a new cathedral in the city. The construction would not start for another 25 years. The university professors and the barbers (the doctors of the time), were probably worried about rumors of a new plague, the third since the Great Plague in 1348, and the townspeople were probably complaining about taxes, as usual. The farmers, who led their cattle to pasture, were surely complaining about the weather, as it had been unusually unstable.



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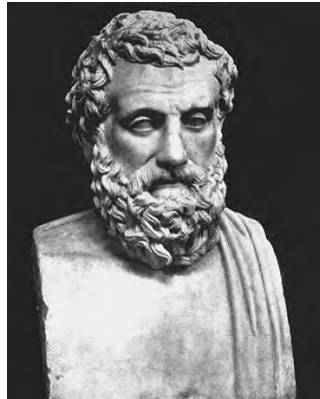
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of Plato Greeks

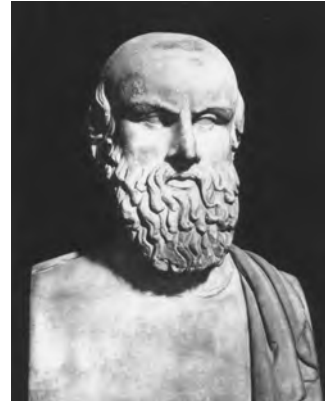
If they were not too busy with their cows, they perhaps caught a glimpse of a monk riding along the grassy, mud-ridden path that was part of the main road between the cities of Florence and Milan. We will never know if they saw him, or if they asked themselves why he smiled.

It was one of the precious moments when human history was about to change. Perhaps the monk knew this, or perhaps he only smiled because he had reached his destination, the house where the poet Francesco Petrarch lived, so that he could deliver the letters he carried and get something to eat, and perhaps even a glass or two of delicious Farnesian wine to drink.

The joyful poet who received the letters knew for certain that it was a historic moment. He had anticipated a particular letter for some time now. As soon as he held it in his hand, he rushed to his quarter in the castle, which was owned by the rulers of Milan, the Visconti family. When finally in one of his rooms, he sat down on a stool in front of a wooden table, lit a candle, and opened the letter. It contained a Latin translation of the first book of the *Odyssey*, by the Greek poet Homer.



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The Birth of the Renaissance

The word Renaissance comes from French and Latin, and means rebirth. With the letter to Petrarch, one of the first steps was taken toward the rebirth of civilization in the Renaissance. It was the heritage of European civilization that was about to be born again.

In the 1330's, the voice of Homer was dead. Almost no one in Western Europe had ever read the works of Plato. No one knew about statesmen and thinkers like Solon and Xenophon, few had heard of Archimedes or of Pythagoras, the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus were long forgotten. So, too, was the Greek language. The leaders of the Church could not read the original text of the New Testament, because it was written in Greek, which had been the primary language of the early Church.

Things had gotten worse and worse by the year. Some of the Greek works were known in translations made from Arabic, but sadly, it was mostly those thinkers who contributed to the destruction of Greek civilization, like Aristotle, which had survived and were read. But for a few copies of his *Timaeus*, Plato was known only through anti-Platonist, pagan commentators, and through indirect references to him by Church Fathers such as St. Augustine. Despite his works being almost unknown in the period leading up to the 1300's, Plato's *Timaeus* had been much studied by thinkers including Peter Abelard and Thierry de Chartres, as well as others. But when Petrarch tried to find the *Timaeus* in the 1330's, he could not find a single copy in all of Italy or France!

In the Eastern, Orthodox Church, the situation was a bit better. Greek was the main language used in the Church and diplomatic work. But, in the early 1300's, Orthodox fundamentalists were doing their best to destroy, or hide, books in Greek that were not the Bible, or written by select Christian authors.

A handful of individuals in the East and the West joined hands to revive the Greek heritage, especially the method of Plato, and thus save European civilization. One of the main aims was to create peace and prosperity, by unifying the Eastern and Western Churches, which had been effectively in a state of war for several centuries.

In the East, it was Georgius Gemistos Plethon (1360-1450/1452) who led the effort to revive Platonism and the study of the Greeks. In Western Europe, it was the poet and diplomat Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), whom we left sitting at his wooden table, who spearheaded the effort to revive knowledge of the Greek language and the tradition of Plato. Petrarch had been in turn inspired by the great poet and humanist Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), whose efforts to create a unified Italian language, and whose works on philosophy and statecraft, were among the main influences on the movement that rediscovered the Greeks and Plato.

A Letter to Homer

After reading the letter, Petrarch ordered his servants to open a bottle of the best wine in the house.

The letter had been sent to Petrarch by the writer and diplomat Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), who lived in Florence. Boccaccio had some time before met a monk, Leontius Pilatus, who had studied the Greek language at the school of a former friend of Petrarch's, Barlaam of Calabria (c.1290-c.1350). Happy to meet a person who spoke Greek, Boccaccio had persuaded him to stay in Florence to translate Homer, and to teach him the language. Pilatus stayed in Florence for three years, and

translated both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into Latin. The text he used was Petrarch's copy of Homer, the only known manuscript copy in all Western Europe. Petrarch had paid for the translation, and now he held the first book in his hand.

After reflecting upon the historical importance of the letter, Petrarch grabbed his feather pen, dipped it in ink, and wrote a letter to the poet Homer himself. His idea was to let a copyist at a nearby monastery copy it, and the translation of Homer, by hand. Then he would send it to all his friends, who eagerly awaited news of the translation. Petrarch estimated that eight copies were needed. He knew of eleven persons, himself included, in all Western Europe, who shared his interest in Homer and the project to revive the Greek heritage. This was according to his own estimate.

"Long before your letter reached me," he wrote to Homer, the "letter" being the first part of the translation,

I had formed an intention of writing to you, and I should really have done it, if it had not been for the lack of a common language. I am not so fortunate as to have learned Greek, and the Latin tongue, which you once spoke, by the aid of our writers, you seem of late, through the negligence of their successors, to have quite forgotten. From both avenues of communication, consequently, I have been debarred, and so have kept silence. But now there comes a man who restores you to us, single-handedly, and makes you a Latin again.

Your Penelope cannot have waited longer nor with more eager expectation for her Ulysses, than I did for you. At last, though, my hope was fading gradually away. Except for a few of the opening lines of certain books, from which there seemed to flash upon me the face of the friend whom I had been longing to behold, a momentary glimpse, dim through distance, or, rather, the sight of his streaming hair, as he vanished from my view,—except for this, no hint of a Latin Homer had come to me, and I had no hope of being able ever to see you face to face. For as regards the little book that is circulated under your name, while I cannot say whose it is, I do feel sure that it is yours only as it has been culled from you and accredited to you, and is not your real work at all. This friend of ours, however, if he lives, will restore you to us in your entirety. He is now at work, and we are beginning to enjoy not only the treasures of wisdom that are stored away in your divine poems, but also the sweetness and charm of your speech. One fragment has come to my hands already, Grecian precious ointment in Latin vessels.²

Petrarch signed his name, and the date, "on the ninth day of October, in the year of this last age of the world the 1360th."

The first step toward Europe's rediscovery of the Greeks had been taken. Petrarch hoped to copy the book, once ful-

ly translated, and spread it, perhaps even to use it to educate a group of youngsters who would learn to read Greek.

Petrarch died before he saw the results of his work, but history can testify that he succeeded. With the Renaissance, the world was lifted out of the great crisis of the 1300's, and the Greek heritage was saved for posterity.

The Renaissance

There is a dangerous tendency among certain layers of popular opinion to simplify and idealize the Renaissance that occurred between 1400 and 1520. Many describe it as some kind of utopia, where beautiful art and architecture surrounded people all the time, and where simple peasants were happily reciting Dante and other great poets while working in the fields. Often, people with the most divergent world-outlooks are lumped together and regarded as progressive "Renaissance men," just because they lived during this time period.

Often, the Renaissance is linked to its splendid visible results. It is linked to painting and other forms of art, which advanced and became more "realistic" than before; to the great discoveries of exploration; and perhaps, even to intense philosophical debate. Some would perhaps even say that the industrial revolution started with the Renaissance, and attribute to it, the rise of manufacturing, or perhaps the rise of modern banking.

Others put the emphasis on negative aspects, like incipient colonialism and slavery, or the expulsion of the Jews and Moors from Spain in the 1400's and 1500's.

But, contrary to popular opinion, the Renaissance was essentially a battle about ideas, especially about the value, and rights, of man. Do human beings have the capacity to understand how the mind of the Creator works? Can men use their acquired knowledge of the laws of nature, to work for the common good of all? This was what the fight was all about.

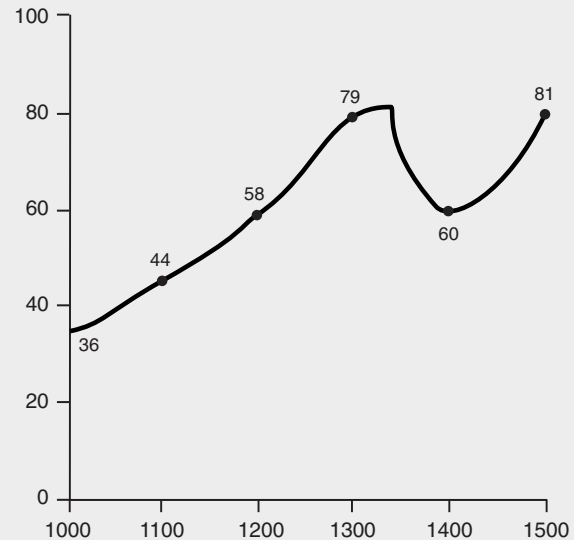
Our journey toward the creation of the Renaissance has already begun, but before we return to Petrarch, we should look at an earlier time.

The Great Plague

The writers Petrarch and Boccaccio lived during the period of the so-called Great Plague, or Black Death. It had hit Italy in 1348, and between one-half and one-third of the population of the country died. Afterwards, the area surrounding Milan was filled with ruined villages, churches, and monasteries.

Boccaccio, whom Petrarch would become familiar with two years later, described the plague in his *Decameron*, as follows:

FIGURE 1. *Population of Europe, A.D. 1000-1500 (millions).*



Source: Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History*.

I say, then, that in the year 1348 after the Son of God's fruitful incarnation, into the distinguished city of Florence, that most beautiful of Italian cities, there entered a deadly pestilence.

One citizen avoided another, everybody neglected their neighbors and rarely or never visited their parents and relatives unless from a distance; the ordeal had so withered the hearts of men and women that brother abandoned brother, and the uncle abandoned his nephew and the sister her brother, and many times, wives abandoned their husbands; and, what is even more incredible and cruel, mothers and fathers abandoned their children and would refuse to visit them.

There were dead bodies all over, and all were treated in pretty much the same manner by their neighbors, who were moved no less by fear that the corrupted bodies would infect them than by any pity they felt toward the deceased. They would drag the dead bodies out of their homes and leave them in front of their doors. Things sank to the level that people were disposed of, much as we would now dispose of a dead goat.

Throughout the villages and fields the poor, miserable peasants and their families, who lacked the care of doctors or the aid of servants, died more like beasts than humans, day and night, on the roads and in their fields. . . . Thus their cattle, donkeys, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and even their dogs, man's best friends, were driven off into the fields, where the wheat stood abandoned, not merely unharvested, but not even cut.³

Cause and Effect

The Great Plague of 1347-51 is quite well known, but few know that it was man-made, and that the population of Europe had begun declining decades before the

Petrarch: Bringing the Great Minds of the Past to Life

Petrarch's world was characterized by horrors that appeared truly apocalyptic: the worst economic collapse in history; the deadliest pandemic; global combat between Christian and non-Christian; religious schism; and constant war and popular insurrection throughout Europe.

Petrarch's lifetime (1304-1374) coincides almost exactly with the transfer of the Papacy from Rome to Avignon in France from 1309 to 1377. This *de facto* kidnapping was one part of a complex controversy that dominated Christendom in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries, over the limits of the secular power of the Papacy to command kings and, more important, levy taxes. At this time, all Italy was divided into two factions: the partisans of the German Emperor, the Ghibellines; and the Papalist Guelphs. In the city-state of Florence, the Guelphs were further split into the extremist *I neri* (the Blacks) and the moderately secular *I bianchi* (the Whites).

The intellectual leader of the Whites was Dante Alighieri. One of his political subordinates was Petracco dell' Incisa, Petrarch's father. Eventually, the faction fight came to blows. The Whites lost, and their leaders were sent into exile. Both Dante and Ser Petracco wandered from city to city. Francesco was born in Arezzo; seven years later, when the Petracci lived in Pisa, Dante stayed with them. Giovanni Boccaccio (born nine years after Petrarch) was the illegitimate son of Boccaccino di Chelino, onetime Prior (governor) of the Florentine Republic and a partner in the Bardi banking firm. The collapse of the Bardi in 1340 was the proximate cause of the global economic collapse during Petrarch's lifetime. Boccaccio's stepmother was a kinswoman of Dante.

Contemplating Mortality

After legal studies, Petrarch took minor orders (but never the priesthood) and became an ecclesiastical bureaucrat serving the Avignon Papacy. As his literary talent became recognized, he was offered a series of sinecures that allowed him to devote much of his time to poetry. In 1336, he climbed Mount Ventoux in southern France, carrying along a copy of his beloved St. Augustine's *Confessions*. At the summit, contem-

plating his mortality, Petrarch realized that his arduous climb was the metaphor for the remaining years of his life.

Petrarch soon reached a profound understanding: The seeming impotence of humanity to prevent the ceaseless wars and fratricide and political chaos of the time was not the "will of God," but rather the failing of man. For hundreds of years, Christian thinkers had ignored a true understanding of the great ideas of the past that had built civilization, just because those ideas came from "pagans." Had not Augustine stood on the shoulders of the ancients, to become the greatest of all Church Fathers? By allowing the great ideas of the past to "waste and spoil, through our own cruel and insufferable neglect," wrote Petrarch in one of his famous "Letters to Marcus Tullius Cicero," we fail "to cultivate our own talents, thereby depriving the future of the fruits that they might have yielded."

Against the Aristoteleans

The arduous climb to which Petrarch committed the rest of his life was to end the dark period of human ignorance and bring alive again the mental life of all the great minds of the past.

By the end of his life, Petrarch had amassed one of the greatest libraries in Europe, filled with works of Plato and other Greeks not seen in the West for centuries; he personally rediscovered much lost correspondence of Cicero after painstaking research. The Republic of Venice unsuccessfully offered Petrarch a palace in exchange for his library; seven years before his death, Venice deployed several Aristotelean scholars from the University of Padua to befriend the old man, and then attack his reputation for scholarship. Petrarch answered them publicly in "De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia" ("On His Own and Many People's Ignorance"), his last major work. The Aristoteleans think I am ignorant?, asked Petrarch. Well, "I have sixteen or more of Plato's books at home, of which I do not know whether they have ever heard the names. They will be amazed when they hear this. If they do not believe it, let them come and see."

—Michael Minnicino

plague actually erupted.

The population of Europe had increased by 20 percent in the 1000's, by more than 25 percent in the 1100's, and by more than 30 percent in the 1200's [SEE Figure 1]. Technological innovations like the windmill, the technical and architectural skill of the great cathedral builders, as well as reforms in agriculture, had helped to foster the growth of the economy, aided by advanced products imported from the Arabs and the Chinese.

By the end of the 1200's, however, population growth ceased, and by the beginning of the 1300's, a decline in the number of inhabitants of Europe had begun.⁴ It was because the population was already exhausted, that the plague killed such a large portion of the population when it finally struck Europe.

The reason for the population decline in the early 1300's was that the population could not be sustained when production collapsed as a result of a collapse in the productive capacity of the societies. The price of food rose, owing to speculation on its future price, and the technological level fell because no new improvements were made in agriculture. The reasons for the collapse was simple: speculation!

In a study published in *Fidelio* in 1995, Paul B. Gallagher describes how, when Petrarch was still young, Europe was looted by the financial oligarchs.⁵ Like today, the bankers viewed the payment of debt and interest to be more important than the welfare of the population. Royal revenues were paid directly over to the bankers, who also maintained financial control over all trade.

The example of how this worked in Norway, is typical. While, in Southern Europe, Venice controlled trade and finances, Venice's allies in the German city-state of Lübeck used similar methods in the North. Norway was not self-sufficient in food, and needed to import salt as a preservative, but trade in food and salt was totally controlled by Lübeck. Since they had a monopoly on both trade and banking, they could demand overly high prices for food, and at the same time lend money to the Norwegian traders and king at ridiculously high interest rates. When Norway tried to import cheaper food and salt from England, Lübeck waged war, and Norway was eventually starved into capitulation.⁶

Later that century, in 1343, the financial system in Western Europe went bankrupt, because the two major banking houses of the day, the Florentine Bardi and Peruzzi, collapsed, when England could no longer pay its debts. This greatly increased the effects of the plague.

At the same time, a set of great political disasters

struck the world, as a result of the folly and greed of the leaders of the Church and states. For example, in 1309, the Church in the West was greatly shaken by the so-called "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy. The seat of the papacy was moved from Rome to Avignon, in France. Soon, the new holy city was transformed into a Babylon of prostitution, debauchery, and "wordly pleasure," according to Petrarch.

Soon a second, and even a third (!) Pope, were installed by political opponents of the Avignon faction, and the Church, which was already divided between East and West, split once again. Things looked dark for mankind.

Francesco Petrarch

The story of the Renaissance begins in Arezzo, northern Italy, where Francesco Petrarch was born in 1304. His family later moved to the papal city of Avignon, where he was raised, and where he lived for almost 25 years, except for studies in Bologna in the 1320's, and frequent travels. Petrarch later described Avignon as the "Babylon of the West," where "heaven and hell converged." It was the center of the wordly power of one of the two Popes at the time, and the decadence of Avignon greatly shocked the young Petrarch. But he benefitted greatly from its rich libraries, and met learned scholars from all over Europe, including diplomats from Orthodox Eastern Europe.

In the 1320's, Petrarch studied the Italian poet Dante Alighieri, who had died in 1321, and began to explore the Italian language. He started to write poems, and soon became a popular poet. In the 1330's, he wrote the famous sonnets to his beloved Laura, who would later die of the plague. By this time he was already famous and beloved for his poetry, and when in 1341 he visited Rome, he was lauded as the leading poet of the age, the "New Dante."

Like his predecessor Dante, from a very early age Petrarch warned that a disaster would strike mankind, if its leaders did not break from their folly. The degeneration of Avignon was used as a prime example of the corruption. Petrarch knew that the only salvation for civilization was to overturn all the existing social axioms, and find a better philosophical foundation for society. He thus proposed to build a "youth movement," based on the rediscovery of the greatest thinkers of the past, the history of past civilizations, and the cultural and scientific achievement of prior times. Above all, the movement should be based on the rediscovery of Plato, and on the development of the individual human mind.

Politically, this meant to unify the Church in the West, and ultimately, all Christianity.

To accomplish this, things had to change. And, to accomplish this change, Petrarch turned to Plato.

St. Augustine and Plato

It was by reading St. Augustine, that Petrarch realized the importance of Plato. In Chapter Eight of *The City of God*, St. Augustine had written:

If, then, Plato defined the wise man as one who imitates, knows, loves this God, and who is rendered blessed through fellowship with Him in His own blessedness, why discuss with the other philosophers? It is evident that none come nearer to us than the Platonists. The Platonic philosophers have recognized the true God as the author of all things, the source of the light of truth, and the bountiful bestower of all blessedness.⁷

St. Augustine emphasized that the Platonists had a superior understanding of how the mind worked, and believed that the aim of moral philosophy, as well as reason, was the Good.

Then, again, as far as regards the doctrine which treats of that which they call logic, that is, rational philosophy, far be it from us to compare them with those who attributed to the bodily senses the faculty of discriminating truth! Those, however, whom we justly rank before all others, have distinguished those things which are conceived by the mind from those which are perceived by the senses, neither taking away from the senses anything to which they are competent, nor attributing to them anything beyond their competency. And the light of our understandings, by which all things are learned by us, they have affirmed to be that self-same God by whom all things were made. . . .

At present, it is sufficient to mention that Plato determined the final good to be to live according to virtue, and affirmed that only he can attain to virtue who knows and imitates God—which knowledge and imitation are the only cause of blessedness. Therefore he did not doubt that to philosophize is to love God, whose nature is incorporeal.

The true and highest good, according to Plato, is God, and therefore he would call him a philosopher who loves God; for philosophy is directed to the obtaining of the blessed life, and he who loves God is blessed in the enjoyment of God.⁸

St. Augustine also recognized Platonism as the way to conduct a dialogue with other religions. He wrote:

Plato himself, and they who have well understood him—Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, and all who may have held like opinions—and all who have been held wise men and philosophers among all nations who are discovered to

have seen and taught this, be they Atlantics, Libyans, Egyptians, Indians, Persians, Chaldeans, Scythians, Gauls, Spaniards, or of other nations — we prefer these to all other philosophers, and confess that they approach nearest to us.⁹

Homer

But, in order learn from the Greeks and to revive Plato, one had to be able to read Greek, and Petrarch found no one in the Church in the West who could read even a few sentences of Greek. It was also necessary to have Greek texts, and almost no Greek manuscripts were to be found.

This is where the fun began!

Petrarch got help from some co-thinkers in the Orthodox, Eastern Church. While visiting Avignon, Petrarch met with the Platonist Orthodox monk Barlaam. Barlaam had read St. Augustine, as well as Plato, and shared the view that Platonism could become a bridge between East and West. The two met for the first time in 1339, and later they would meet again in Naples, in 1342. Barlaam became the teacher of Petrarch, who attempted to learn Greek. As a “textbook,” Barlaam used his beloved Plato, and gave Petrarch a book with sixteen dialogues, telling him to practice with them. And, although he did not learn to read it, the very possession of the valuable book inspired Petrarch to help others to read Plato in the future.

In 1350, Petrarch, while in Rome, met Giovanni Boccaccio. The two men became friends instantly, and Petrarch soon afterwards visited Boccaccio in Florence. Inspired by Petrarch, Boccaccio decided to help him in the Greek translation project.

Around this time, Petrarch was involved in diplomatic work, and conspired to get the Pope to move from Avignon to Rome. He frequently visited Avignon for this purpose. During one such visit in 1353, he met with the Byzantine diplomat Nikolaos Sigeros, whom he asked to search for Greek manuscripts, and Latin manuscripts of Cicero, in the East. Sigeros did not find any works by Cicero, but he found something far more precious for Petrarch, a copy of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

This was the manuscript from which Petrarch commissioned a translation. Petrarch wrote back to Sigeros, after receiving the volume:

Your present of the genuine and original text of the divine poet, the fountain of all inventions, is worthy of yourself and of me: you have fulfilled your promise, and satisfied my desires. Yet your liberality is still imperfect: with Homer you should have given me yourself; a guide, who could lead me into the fields of light, and disclose to my wondering eyes the spacious miracles of the *Iliad* and

Odyssey. But, alas! Homer is dumb, or I am deaf; nor is it in my power to enjoy the beauty which I possess. I have seated him by the side of Plato, the prince of poets near the prince of philosophers. . . . I am delighted with the aspect of Homer; and as often as I embrace the silent volume, I exclaim with a sigh, Illustrious bard! With what pleasure should I listen to thy song, if my sense of hearing were not obstructed and lost by the death of one friend, and in the much-lamented absence of another. Nor do I yet despair; and the example of Cato suggests to me comfort and hope, since it was in the last period of age that he attained the knowledge of the Greek letters.¹⁰

Petrarch told his friend Boccaccio about the book, who decided to help him, and even to try to learn Greek himself. A few years later, Boccaccio befriended Leontius Pilatus (d.1366), with whose help they could begin the project of translating Homer; and soon, Petrarch received the first chapter of the *Odyssey* in a letter from Boccaccio, as we have already seen.

While translating, Pilatus read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* aloud to the stunned Boccaccio. In a letter to Petrarch, he described how proud he was to be the first individual for hundreds of years in “the Latin-speaking world” (Western Europe), who “heard Homer speak.” “I feel sorry for the Latin-speaking world, which has neglected the study of Greek so much that no one even can read the Greek alphabet,” he wrote.

In the mid-1360’s, Boccaccio presented Petrarch with the finished Latin translation of Homer. Pilatus had translated both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into crude Latin prose. The translation was terrible—Pilatus was not at all used to writing in Latin. But Petrarch and Boccaccio were happy, for at last they could read the works of Homer.

Boccaccio looked for more Greek manuscripts. He had heard that a few Italians living in southern Italy still spoke Greek, so he travelled to the famous monastery at Monte Cassino, to see what he could find. The writer Benvenuto da Imola describes the terrible condition in which Boccaccio found the library there:

[H]e found the room which contained this treasure without a door or key, and when he entered, he saw grass growing in the windows, and all the books and shelves covered with a thick layer of dust. When he turned over the manuscripts, he found many rare and ancient works with whole sheets cut out, or with the margins ruthlessly clipped. As he left the room he burst into tears and, on asking a monk whom he had met in the cloister to explain the neglect, was told that some of the monks, wishing to gain a few *soldi*, had torn out whole handfuls of leaves and made them into Psalters, which they sold to boys, and had cut off strips of parchment, which they turned into amulets to sell to women.¹¹

Boccaccio saved a few manuscripts and returned to Florence.

A few years later, Petrarch gained his largest political victory. His friend and ally Guillaume de Grimoard had been elected Pope in 1362, taking the name Urban V. In 1367, after many years of negotiations with France and with the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna, in which Petrarch played a crucial role, Urban V moved to Rome. The first step toward reunification of the conflicting parts of the Church in the West had been taken. Fifty years later, the schism was over, and the process of unifying the Western and Eastern Churches had begun.

Academic Life

Academic life in the 1300’s was more than miserable. At its worst, individuals like William of Ockham (1280-1349), a teacher at the University of Paris, and his school of Nominalism, could gain fame. Ockham denied the capacity of the human mind to discover anything, since ideas were an illusion, existing only as abstract, logical “signs.” Thus, Ockham defended the absolute predominance of the Divine will. According to Ockham, human beings were slaves, who had no free will and were evil, while God was a dictator whose word was law, and who could turn black into white, right into wrong, any time he so wished.

Petrarch identified Aristotle as the source of this misery, and predicted that Plato in his writings, once they could be read, would prove that this was wrong, and that the relationship between God and man was more than that of a tyrant to a slave.

“The multitude of men praise Aristotle, the greater men praise Plato”—so wrote Petrarch in his treatise, “On His Own and Many People’s Ignorance” (“De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia”), in 1368.¹² Petrarch and his later followers reacted against the view Aristotle had of God and man. A common theme of all the critics of Aristotle at the time, was that Aristotle did not view God as a Creator, but only as a kind of magician, an “unmoved mover.”

Why was this important? Because of the view of man! Whether man is created “in the image of God.” What happens to man, if we are created in the image of a Creator, or in the image of an “unmoved mover”? If God is a Creator, then mankind is created to help God in the act of Creation; the work of man makes the world better and more beautiful. But, with the “unmoved mover,” everything was created perfect in the beginning, and the works of man only act to destroy what God created perfect. Thus, the Aristotelean view, that man can only register

the works of Creation though the senses, classify them, and logically investigate them—but never *know* them, so as to participate in their further development!

Why Plato?

Plato viewed God as a Creator, which is why there was such interest in his worldview in the Renaissance.

In a Jan. 28, 2003 webcast, Lyndon LaRouche was asked what the human soul is. He answered by reference to Plato:

We can know the truth of the existence of God, as a Creator. We can verify things, that we get as a matter of knowledge, by the same principle, developed by Plato in his collection of Socratic dialogues. . . .

We have the ability to have certain knowledge, of things that some people call “spiritual,” “religious,” and so forth, without relying on any particular teaching, book, or anything else. We can know that, the same way, that we know any other principle, that I just illustrated, crudely in other places, this principle of gravitation. You find a contradiction to what the senses teach you. And you solve the contradiction, and you demonstrate experimentally, that you found the solution. This becomes known as a “universal principle.”

What’s this question of the soul? Which is dealt with so admirably by Plato, and by Moses Mendelssohn. One should read these things, and study them. Because, one should know, rather than learn. We have too much learning, and not enough knowledge. . . .

Mankind, by his ability to make discoveries of principle, and intervene in the Biosphere, through that knowledge, is able to change the universe, in ways that the universe would otherwise not change itself.

And, through this, man increases his power to exist in and over the universe, and incurs responsibilities for the universe, which are commensurate with this knowledge. Therefore, we know that discovery, Platonic principle of hypothesis, is a universal physical principle in the universe, because it is physically efficient in the universe, in changing the universe.¹³

Petrarch, in his time, did not have the same idea of Plato as LaRouche, but he knew that the importance of Plato lay in his method.

A friend of Petrarch’s in the academic world once identified Plato as being merely a poet, while on the other hand he described Aristotle, who was commonly called “The Philosopher” by the medieval scholastics, as more important. Petrarch answered him:

And then, what am I to say of Plato, who by the consensus of all the greatest judges is not a poet at all, but the prince of philosophers? Turn to Cicero, to Augustine, to other writers who speak with authority, as many of them as you please, and you will find that wherever in their books they

have exalted Aristotle above the rest of the philosophers, they have always taken pains to declare that Plato is the one exception. What it is that makes Plato a poet I cannot imagine, unless it be a remark of Panaetius, quoted by Tullius [Cicero], where he is denominated the Homer of philosophy. This means nothing more than chief of philosophers; as preeminent among them as Homer among the poets. If we do not explain it so, what are we to say of Tullius himself, when in a certain passage in the letters to Atticus he calls Plato his God? They are both trying in every possible way to express their sense of the godlike nature of Plato’s genius; hence the name of Homer, and, more explicit still, that of God.¹⁴



In the rest of this letter, Petrarch told his friend that his view of learning was wrong. Sense perception and mere learning by memorizing facts, have nothing to do with true knowledge, he wrote.

In all his writings, Petrarch showed that the poetical capacity to discover and to inspire—and not sense perception and rote memorization—was the best talent for a teacher, and for people in general. Human beings should be creators in the small, in the living image of the Creator, God. Only in this way could mankind fulfill its destiny.

Petrarch’s main attack on the Aristotelean cult of “senses and memory” was delivered in 1367, when he answered a slander by a group of Venetian scholastics. They claimed that he was an ignorant man who hated learning, since he did not obey the Aristotelean rules of the academic world.

To answer them, Petrarch wrote *On His Own and Many People’s Ignorance*. With harsh words, he attacked the professors who taught Aristotelean logic and philosophy, as “prostitutes who delight in worrying about futile questions of words.” They should revive the study of



Statues in the portico of the Uffizi Palace, Florence (left to right): Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca, Giovanni Boccaccio.

Plato instead, who was called “the premier philosopher,” by ancient scholars like Cicero, Virgil, Pliny, Plotinus, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and others.

Greek Is Revived

Petrarch died in 1374, Boccaccio in 1375, but their work did not die with them. Their collaborators, especially those in Florence, continued their work, concentrating on finding ancient manuscripts and on reviving the Greek language. After the death of Petrarch, it was the Florentine statesman Coluccio di Piero di Salutati (1331-1406) who led the effort. He had befriended Petrarch at the end of the 1360’s, and they continued to exchange letters until Petrarch’s death. After 1374, Salutati purchased parts of Petrarch’s library, which was the largest private library in Europe at the time.

In 1375, Salutati was summoned to Florence to be Chancellor (Prime Minister) of the Republic, which office he held until his death. He was able, after awhile, to implement some of Petrarch’s ideas. Firstly, he reformed the schools in Florence, and personally sponsored and guided promising young men. He often helped youngsters who did not come from the rich elite, looking to their competence, not their status in society. Secondly, he recruited a Byzantine scholar who knew both Latin and Greek, Manuel Chrysoloras (1350-1415),

a pupil of the Greek scholar and Platonist Georgius Gemistus Plethon, to come and work in Florence as a teacher. At the age of 65, Salutati even sat with the youngsters and took Greek lessons, in order to read the manuscripts he had inherited from Petrarch!

Chrysoloras began teaching in Florence in 1396. After four fruitful years, he left Florence and moved to Pavia, to teach at its university. He later taught in Venice, Rome, Florence, and Verona, as well as Padua. As a part of his work, he wrote the first Greek grammar in Latin, *Erotemeta*, which was printed in 1484. A lexicon was later prepared by the monk Giovanni Crastone of Piacenza, and printed in 1497. But both books were copied by hand by the students, long before they could be printed. Chrysoloras did several translations, among

them the first translation of Plato’s *Republic* into Latin.

Chrysoloras travelled back and forth between Italy and Constantinople several times. The sources tell us that his main mission, besides teaching Greek, was to promote a union between the Churches in the East and West. We will return to this subject soon.

Another colleague was John of Ravenna (1356-1417), a personal friend and student of Petrarch from a very early age, until 1374. In 1397 John was appointed professor of rhetoric and eloquence at the University of Florence, and he taught at other universities as well, including Padua. Although he left no writings, he did much to encourage the study of Latin and Greek among his students.

The Translators

With the students of Chrysoloras, Plato was finally translated into Latin. Leonardo Bruni, as well as some other students of Chrysoloras such as Uberto Decembrio and Cencio de Rustici, translated ten dialogues; Bruni personally translated the *Phaedo*, *Crito*, *Apology*, *Phaedrus*, *Gorgias*, and the *Letters*. In the following generation, the *Republic* was translated twice, by Uberto Decembrio’s son Pier Candido, and by the Sicilian Antonio Cassarino. The Milanese Francesco Filelfo translated the *Euthyphro* and some of the *Letters*, while in Rome the papal secretary Rinuccio Aretino rendered the *Crito*, *Euthyphro* and *Axiochus* [mistakenly

attributed to Plato–Ed.] into Latin. George of Trebizond (1395–1486), a papal secretary from Crete, translated the *Laus*, *Epinomis*, and *Parmenides*. In 1462, Pietro Balbi, an ally of Nicolaus of Cusa (1401–1464) and Johannes Bessarion (1403–1472), translated Proclus’s *Platonic Theology*. In Florence, Lorenzo Lippi da Colle translated the *Ion*. The translation activity of the humanists culminated in the work of Marsilio Ficino, who in 1484 published the first complete Latin version of the works of Plato.

As for Homer, the first poetic translation was commissioned by Pope Nicholas V in the mid-1450’s, and was done by Filelfo. Filelfo was, by the way, married to the daughter of his teacher, Chrysoloras.

Leonardo Bruni

But it all began with the youth movement organized by Salutati, Chrysoloras, and John of Ravenna. The mission they gave it, was to search for, translate, and copy old Greek, Latin, and Arabic manuscripts, as well as to promote Greek learning. This movement was known in Italy as the “book-hunters” or, as the movement that propagated a unity between the fractions of the Roman Church and other Churches, like the Orthodox Church.

Perhaps the most important student of Chrysoloras was Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444). He was born in Arezzo, the same town as Petrarch. As a young student he studied law at first, but later, influenced by Salutati and Chrysoloras, he turned his attention to the study of the Classics.

In his autobiography, Bruni vividly describes the arguments he encountered from Salutati and Chrysoloras. Just think about how joyful it would be to hold daily conversations with Plato, Homer, and all the other Greek philosophers and poets, they told him. “For 1,700 years, no one in Italy has understood Greek, and despite this, all would agree that everything we know originates from the Greeks.”¹⁵ After some sleepless nights, while thinking about the matter, he decided to give up his law studies and study Greek instead.

From 1405 onwards, Bruni was apostolic secretary to several Popes, with responsibility for correspondence with the Orthodox Church. He also wrote the first history of Florence, and became Chancellor of the city in 1427. Bruni translated several works of Aristototele, Plutarch, Demosthenes, and Aeschines. He was also the author of biographies in Italian of Dante and Petrarch.

Bruni was way ahead of his time. He recommended that women be allowed to educate themselves and play an important role in the movement to revive the Classics, a revolutionary concept in his age. In a letter to a young woman, Baptista di Montefeltro, he used examples from history to show that, often, women in Greek and Roman

antiquity had been scientists, politicians, and important artists. Bruni wrote to Baptista:

Whilst, alas, upon such times are we fallen that a learned man seems well-nigh a portent, and erudition in a woman is a thing utterly unknown. For 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 [i.e., Aristotelean scholasticism–TJ]; 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.

First amongst such studies I place History: a subject which must not on any account be neglected by one who aspires to true cultivation. For it is our duty to understand the origins of our own history and its development; and the achievements of Peoples and of Kings. For the careful study of the past enlarges our foresight in contemporary affairs, and affords to citizens and to monarchs lessons of incitement or warning in the ordering of public policy. From History, also, we draw our store of examples of moral precepts.

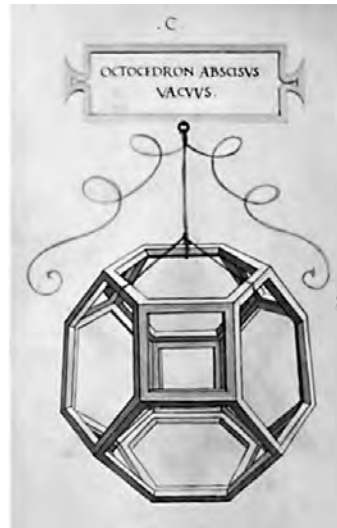
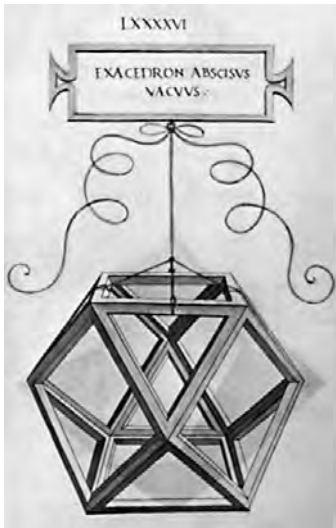
Hence my view, that familiarity with the great poets of antiquity is essential to any claim to true education. For in their writings we find deep speculations upon Nature, and upon the Causes and Origins of things, which must carry weight with us both from their antiquity and from their authorship. Besides these, many important truths upon matters of daily life are suggested or illustrated.¹⁶

The ‘Book-Hunters’

Bruni and Francesco Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), another student of Chrysoloras and Salutati, led a scientific committee for some years, under the sponsorship of the Pope. This committee directed the search for manuscripts, but also worked to bring about the union of the Churches. They were especially active during the Council of Basel in the 1430’s.

Poggio learned Greek, as well as Hebrew, and came to direct much of the search for manuscripts. In 1429, he brought to Rome twelve unpublished comedies of Plautus which he had found. Like Bruni, he also served as Chancellor of Florence, between 1415 and 1422.

One of their friends was Giovanni Aurispa (1369–1459). As a youth, he was sent to Constantinople to study Greek under Chrysoloras and the colleagues of Plethon. He returned to the West in 1423 with 238 manuscripts, among them Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plutarch, Plato, and Xenophon. So industrious was he, that he was charged before the Greek Emperor with emptying the city of all its valuable books. He brought the first copy of Sophocles to the West, and for the first time in more than a thousand years, Sophocles was read in Italy. Later, Aurispa



Illustrations to Luca Pacioli's "De divina proportione" by Leonardo da Vinci, 1497.

The youngster answered "to enjoy myself": Niccolo said to him, that it was a shame that he did not know anything about his-

became a professor of Greek and taught at several universities. In 1441, he was appointed secretary to the Pope, a post he held until the end of his active life.

In the 1390's, Salutati recruited Guarino da Verona (1370-1460) and Niccolo Niccoli (1363-1437), both of whom studied Latin under John of Ravenna. Guarino later went to Constantinople, where he studied Greek for five years in the school of Manuel Chrysoloras. In 1408, he returned with more than fifty Greek manuscripts. The rest of his life was spent teaching Greek and lecturing on history in different Italian cities. He acted as an interpreter at the watershed Council of Florence in 1438-1439.

In addition to writing an elementary Latin grammar, Guarino translated the whole of Strabo from Greek, and some fifteen of Plutarch's "Lives," besides some of the works of Lucian and Isocrates. "Without a knowledge of Greek, Latin scholarship is, in any real sense, impossible,"¹⁷ he wrote, in direct opposition to the Aristoteleans, who claimed that it was enough to read Latin. Guarino was perhaps the most important second-generation teacher of Greek.

A friend of Guarino, Niccolo Niccoli, was to take over the role of Salutati as a patron of young students. He worked closely with Cosimo de' Medici (the Elder) (1389-1464), the most well-known financier of the humanistic revolution in Florence. Both had been educated by students of Chrysoloras, such as Roberto di Rossi, and both had studied Greek. Cosimo also knew Hebrew and Arabic. Both of them sponsored students, built libraries, and financed scientific expeditions to look for manuscripts.

Niccoli was a great polemicist. There are several reports that have survived about how he used the polemical method to get youngsters to study antiquity. It is reported that he once approached a rich young man on the street and asked him what he thought the meaning of life was.

tory, or could not read Latin or Greek. "If you do not learn it, you will be good for nothing, and as soon as the flower of your youth is over, you will be a miserable man without virtue." The boy, named Piero de Pazzi, stopped fooling around and started to study Greek and Latin.

Bruni, who was a good friend of Niccolo, wrote a book in 1402 that reports his friend Niccoli's arguments against some stubborn Aristoteleans:

Take philosophy—to consider especially the mother of all the other liberal arts, from whose fountain is derived all this human culture of ours. Philosophy was once brought from Greece into Italy by Cicero, and watered by that golden stream of eloquence. But since a great part of those books has perished, and the remaining ones are so faulty that they are not far from death, how do you think we are to learn philosophy at this time?

But there are many masters of this knowledge who promise to teach it. O splendid philosophers of our time, who teach what they do not know! I cannot wonder sufficiently at them, how they learned philosophy while being ignorant of letters; for when they speak they utter more solecisms than words. And so, I should rather hear them snoring, than speaking. But if anyone should ask them on whose authority and precepts they rely in this splendid wisdom of theirs, they say: The Philosopher's, by which they mean Aristotle's. And when there is need to confirm something or other, they bring forth the sayings in these books, which they claim to be Aristotle's—words harsh, awkward, dissonant, which would wear out anyone's ears. The Philosopher says this, they tell us. It is impious to contradict him, and for them *ipse dixit* has the force of truth, as if he had been the only philosopher, or his sayings were as fixed as those which Pythian Apollo gave forth from his holy sanctuary.

Not that I say this to censure Aristotle; I have no war with that very wise man, only with the folly of these Aristoteleans. If they were simply ignorant, they would be, if

not praiseworthy, at least to be tolerated in these wretched times. But now, when so much arrogance has been joined to their ignorance that they call and esteem themselves wise, who could bear them with equanimity?¹⁸

Ambrogio Traversari

Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) studied Greek and Hebrew in Florence under Chrysoloras and John of Ravenna. He later worked closely with Nicolaus of Cusa, who became the most important philosopher of his time.

Traversari translated the Fathers of the Church anew from Greek and, inspired by Petrarch, he collected manuscripts. Many of these were later given to Cusa, and are still to be seen in his library at Berncastel-Kues. In the 1420's, Cusa began to gather a group of activists and humanists around himself, including Niccolò Niccoli, Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397-1482), Giuliano Cesarini (1398-1444), and Aeneas Sylvanus Piccolomini (1405-1458), who later became Pope Pius II. Almost all the important figures of the Italian Renaissance were connected to this circle.

For example, Toscanelli was the mathematics instructor of Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), the architect of the Dome of Florence and the founder of modern architecture. Later, Leonardo da Vinci became a good friend of Toscanelli's. Among the topics of great interest in Traversari's group was geography. Toscanelli, and others, studied a recently acquired manuscript of Ptolemy's *Geography*, in an attempt to find a new sea-route to the East, outside the control of Venice. The map had been brought to Europe by another pupil of Chrysoloras, Palla Strozzi (1372-1462), who found it in Constantinople in 1400. Later, Toscanelli drew the map used by Christopher Columbus on his voyage of discovery. Columbus copied this map into one of the books he always carried with him, the *Universal History of Facts and Deeds*, by Aeneas Sylvanus Piccolomini. It should also be noted that the uncle of the explorer Amerigo Vespucci, after whom the continent America was later named, belonged to this same group. His name was Giorgio Antonio, and he was a Latin scholar and known Platonist. Some sources contemporary to Vespucci also report that he knew Toscanelli.

The Orthodox scholar Georgius Gemistos Plethon also belonged to this circle. He had long discussions with Toscanelli on the works of the ancient geographer Strabo. Later, they asked Guarino da Verona to translate Strabo, which he did.

One of the scientists sponsored by the group was the artist Piero della Francesca (1416-1492), who lived in Florence at the time of the Council. He was an outspoken Platonist, who revolutionized the art of painting and developed a mathematical system of linear perspective.

He wrote a treatise on perspective, "De prospectiva pingendi," drawing heavily on the earlier work of Brunelleschi. He wrote the "Trattato d'abaco" ("Treatise on the Abacus") on algebra and the measurement of polygons and polyhedra (solids), and "De quinque corporibus regularibus," on the five regular (Platonic) solids.

His work would later be continued by his student, Luca Pacioli (d.1509). Together with Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Pacioli wrote *De divina proportione* (*On the Divine Proportion*) in 1497. Three years before, he had completed aspects of Piero della Francesca's work in another book, *Summa de Arithmetica, Geometria, Proportioni, et Proportionalita*. This work came to be instrumental in the development of modern arithmetic and algebra, and inspired the great mathematician Cardano. The works of Piero and Pacioli contributed to the crucial discoveries of the astronomer Johannes Kepler, in the early 1600's. Modern engineering also derives from their work, since linear perspective is crucial to engineering.

Traversari made his greatest impact on world history through his collaboration with Nicolaus of Cusa. Cusa had studied theology and Greek in Padua from 1417 to 1423. At that time, Guarino da Verona and his student Vittorino da Feltre led the teaching of Greek there, and got to know both Traversari and Toscanelli as young students. The latter was Traversari's teacher for, among other things, mathematics.

Cusa and Traversari were perhaps the most important Western Europeans behind the Council of Florence, at which the Orthodox and Roman Churches were reunited—a unification that was made possible through the help of the Platonic concept of the infinite value, and dignity, of man.

The Council of Florence

The project to revive Plato and the Greek heritage cannot be separated from the attempt to reunite the Christian Churches of East and West.

An attempt had been made to do so in the 1200's, but it failed completely, with the collapse of the Roman Church as one result. Petrarch personally led the effort to unify the Roman Church from the schism of the 1300's. After this was accomplished at the Council of Constance in the early 1400's, when a single Pope was restored, the Platonists reached out to the East. Already, at the Council of Constance, Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini had made an attempt to start a discussion of unification with the Orthodox Church.

After many years of negotiations and frequent diplomatic exchanges, a window of opportunity opened in the 1440's, owing to the great crisis of the Byzantine Empire, center of the Orthodox Church and the last

remnant of the Roman Empire.

Cusa and Traversari prepared the ground for the Florentine Council, by organizing and leading a delegation to Constantinople.

In 1437, the delegation, with Cusa as its intellectual leader, arrived in Constantinople, and began negotiating with the Orthodox Church. Eventually, 700 Greeks, including about 40 high-ranking dignitaries, among them the Emperor John VIII Paleologue and Joseph II, Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, journeyed to Italy, with the aim of uniting the Churches. After long negotiations in Florence, all the Orthodox delegates but one, St. Mark of Ephesus, accepted and signed the Union document, either for themselves or, as was the case for some, for the Patriarchs whom they had been entrusted to represent. The signing, on July 5, 1439, was accompanied by a triumphal service, with the solemn declaration of the Union read out in Latin and Greek.

East and West

The Council of Florence has often been described as a Western project, but, in fact, the Council was to a very large degree a creation of Orthodox thinkers. In fact, without the crucial interventions of Eastern Platonists, the Council would not have occurred at all, and the Renaissance would probably have died in the 1430's. Just as the Orthodox Platonists supplied the West with teachers of Greek and Platonic manuscripts, so too was the cooperation of East and West essential at the Council.

The Platonist revival in the East started with Theodore Metochites (c.1294-c.1360) and the teacher of Petrarch,

Barlaam. Both are controversial figures in both Eastern and Western Church history. Barlaam was involved in diplomatic negotiations with the Roman Church, on behalf of Constantinople. He became controversial after he proposed a union based on the philosophy of St. Augustine, and was ultimately expelled from the East. But, until the end, he viewed himself as Orthodox, even during his life as a refugee and priest in the Roman Church.

Their main follower was Georgius Gemistos Plethon, whom we have already encountered, and Plethon's student, Johannes Bessarion. Both participated in the Council of Florence.

To study the work of these Eastern Platonists is fascinating. They reveal that the most crucial question at the Council was not the doctrinal issue of the use of the "*Filioque*" in the creeds of the Churches, as this is usually described. For, underlying this theological debate about *Filioque*—whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son as one Principle (as the Roman Church said), or only from the Father (as the Orthodox claimed)—was a more fundamental debate on method and the value of man. It was when the Platonists showed that the Platonic interpretation of *Filioque*, using the principle of the One and the Many, would be acceptable to both Churches, that unification could take place. Thus, man's potential to participate in God's work of Creation, was acknowledged as a universal principle.

The Orthodox Church was allowed to keep, and use, its creed, and it was not required to insert the Western phrase about *Filioque*. In the same way, other disagreements were overcome. For example, the Orthodox were allowed to use leavened bread in the service, while

Benozzo Gozzoli, "Journey of the Magi," 1459 (detail). The fresco subject was chosen to celebrate the 1437 Council of Florence, and portrays the gathering together of the Council participants from both the West and the East.

Below: Portrait medal of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paleologus, by Antonio Pisanello (1438/39).



Latins were to continue to use the unleavened. All in the spirit of “unity in diversity.”

Plethon

Plethon, who was born around 1360, was educated by Jewish and Muslim scholars. He led a group of scholars who were looking to Platonism as a way of reforming the Orthodox Church. He wrote several books in defense of Plato, and even chose the pseudonym “Plethon,” which is a variant of “Plato.”

Plethon studied several religions, including the ancient Hellenistic religion and Zoroastrianism. He was searching for a way to start a dialogue between the religions, to ultimately unite them. As his enemy George of Trebizond (Trapezuntius)—who had been a Platonist earlier in his life—wrote in the early 1450’s:

It is known that he was so much a Platonist that he claimed that nothing other than what Plato believed about the gods . . . was true, and he dared to write it without restraint. I myself heard him in Florence—for he came to the Council with the Greeks—asserting that the whole world would in a few years adopt one and the same religion, with one mind, one intelligence, one teaching. And when I asked: “Christ’s or Muhammad’s?” he replied: “Neither, but one not differing from paganism.”¹⁹

Plethon would hardly have used the word paganism, but Platonism; but, for the slanderer Trapezuntius, Platonism and paganism were one and the same concept. This same author later wrote: “Plethon wants to transform Christianity into some kind of Platonism. Plato, the pagan!”

After the Council, in 1441, Plethon returned to the Peloponnese, and there he died. Plethon’s most important works are the *Laws*, written in imitation of Plato’s *Laws*, and “On the Differences between Plato and Aristotle,” a treatise which in the 1440’s became the most debated work in all Europe.

On the Differences was based on a series of lectures that Plethon delivered against Aristotle during the Florentine Council. It began by stating: “Our predecessors among both Romans and Greeks esteemed Plato much more highly than Aristotle. But most people today, especially in the West, who regard themselves as more knowledgeable than their predecessors, admire Aristotle more than Plato.”²⁰

Plethon began by describing the difference between Plato, who viewed God as a Creator, and Aristotle, who did not view God as a creator of anything, but only as “the motive force of the universe,” i.e., an “unmoved mover.” Plethon related this difference to two different views of the soul: Does a close connection exist between the Many (souls) and the One (God)? And is the One,

that towards which the Many strive?

The connection between the One and the Many is the the Platonic “ideas” (*eidei*), or “forms,” Plethon wrote.

The Orthodox Church had traditionally talked about the difference between the “essence” (*ousia*) and the “power” or “energy” (*energeia*) of God, or what are sometimes described as the nature, and the will, of God. A difference is established between God as he really is, and God as he reveals himself to man. God’s nature is infinitely different from man’s, they say, and therefore “incommunicable.” Man can, however, strive towards God, and understand his works, by following the will, or “energy,” of God. Ultimately, man can become “deified,” which does not mean that we become gods, but that we let the will of God guide us, and we become “children of God.”

Plethon and his followers had the view that the Platonic ideas, or forms, were a part of the “energy” of God, as we can comprehend him. That is, man is closely related to God in our capacity to more and more fully comprehend God’s “energy,” through the help of *ideas*.

Petrarch’s friend Barlaam was involved in a dispute with a monk from Athos, Gregorius Palamas, on this subject, already in the mid-1300’s. The subject of the argument was the “light of God.” Palamas characterized the essence of God as “incommunicable,” while the energy was the “uncreated light of God,” through which God communicates with creation *via* faith and grace. Barlaam agreed on the issue of the light of God, but added that reason had to be included. Palamas disagreed, because it placed man too close to God.²¹ The view the Orthodox Platonists had on this difference between the essence and energy of God, is very similar to the view Cusa later came to develop. We cannot know the Truth, he wrote, but we can strive towards it. Cusa used the metaphor of the circle and the polygon, showing the species difference between the two: Even if a polygon has an infinite number of sides, it cannot become a circle. Such is the nature of the relation between man and God. Everything we know about God can only be known as approximation, Cusa wrote, just as the polygon can only approximate the circle.

What was the importance of this for the debate about the *Filioque*? Well, the Orthodox said that the the Holy Spirit proceeded only from the Father. Plethon’s view in his *On the Differences* and other writings was, that the Orthodox view is not so different from the Roman one, that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son. The true nature of God is always hidden from man, he explained. The Trinity and other “attributes” of God are not the true nature of God, but God-given revelations that help us human beings get an approximated understanding of a mystery so great that it cannot be grasped by us otherwise.

Thus, in reality, all parts of the Trinity—Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit—proceed from the hidden essence of God. But, as the created energy of God, the Holy Spirit can be said to proceed from the Son as well as from the Father.

Bessarion

The student of Plethon, Johannes Bessarion, delivered a famous lecture in favor of Union, on April 13-14, 1439, based on Platonic principles. Bessarion got a great deal of help from his teacher Plethon, as well as their good friends in the West, Traversari and Cusa, but the arguments were his own.

The importance of this lecture was that Bessarion came up with a solution, which made it possible for the parties at the Council to agree.

Before Bessarion came up with this solution, the delegates were quarreling about whether the Orthodox Church should rewrite its Creed and transform itself into an exact copy of the Roman Church. The Orthodox representatives were against this, of course.

Since the main point of difference was that the Orthodox Church admitted only one source of the Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Roman Church two, Father and Son, Bessarion proposed that “two should be looked at as one.” Or rather, that the Greek and the Latin Creeds should be viewed as “the same,” even though the *texts* “were different.” After his discourse, the Eastern representatives agreed to a reinterpretation of their Creed, in accordance with the Platonist interpretation of the *Filioque*. The Trinity being the Creator, the Creative Christ, and the Created Holy Spirit, or, as they explained it back then: “two hypostases, one action, one productive power, and one product due to the substance and the hypostases of the Father and the Son.” The Union was accomplished, based on an agreement in principle, while the differences in rites and texts remained.

Bessarion stayed in the West after the Union, continuing to work zealously for unification with the other Churches. First, with the Armenians (1440), then the Jacobites and Ethiopians (1442), the Syrians (1444), and the Chaldeans and Maronites (1445). At this time, he also wrote an article to refute the accusations of Mark of Ephesus against the Council, “De successu synodi florentinae.” He also wrote a defense of Plato, *Against the Opponents of Plato*, and translated Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, about Socrates, into Latin.

Bessarion worked closely with Cusa and Pope Nicholas V, an example of which can be seen in the translation of the works of Archimedes. The Pope had ordered the translation in the 1450’s. To this aim he used a manuscript that had apparently been imported by Chrysoloras sixty years earlier. Jacobo da Cremona translated it, and two

copies were sent for proofreading, one to Cusa, and the other to Bessarion. Cusa wrote a treatise on geometry, “De mathematicis complementis,” after receiving the translation of Archimedes, and sent a copy of this to Bessarion.

Attacks Against the Union

In the East, the Union of Florence was not publicly proclaimed until 1425, a decade later, in the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. But on May 29, 1453, the Turks, led by Mohammed II, conquered the city (which was renamed Istanbul), marking the end of the Byzantine Empire. After the fall of Constantinople, the old leader of the Orthodox Church, who was a friend of the Union, was forced out and replaced by Patriarch Gennadios Scholarios, who repudiated the Union. In this, the Patriarch was following the only participant at Florence who did not sign, St. Mark of Ephesus. Mark had been canonized for his refusal, after his death in 1444.

Many of the friends of Union were persecuted when they returned to the East from the Council. The Greek Metropolitan of Kiev and All Russia, Isidore, who had been one of the major architects of Union at the Council, returned to Moscow in 1441 as a Roman Cardinal, but was rejected by both Church and state, arrested, and forced to flee to Lithuania.

The Orthodox Patriarch Scholarios had written several works against Plethon and the Western Platonists even before the rift between the Churches became final. In his *Against Plethon and Against the Greek Polytheists*, he accused Plethon of being a “hedonist,” and proudly proclaimed that Aristotle was superior to Plato. After writing this, he ordered all works by Plethon to be burned, as well as some of those by Plethon’s students.

In the West, the main enemy of the Platonists was George of Trebizond, whose *Comparison of the Philosophers Aristotle and Plato* was written in 1458.

Renaissance and Counter-Renaissance

The Union died, but the fight continued. The Greek project, the revival of Plato, and the work at the Council of Florence survived.

In the 1400’s and the early 1500’s, discoveries were made in the arts and mathematics. The first modern nation-states were founded at the end of the 1400’s by France’s Louis XI and England’s Henry VII; industries and manufactures were promoted; and the “grandchildren” of the book-hunters supported journeys of exploration all over the globe. With the establishment of the first nation-states, the first steps to the industrial revolution, and the hope of creating a world without poverty or

The Arab Renaissance and the Greek

The Greek language was still used in the Eastern Church at the time of Petrarch, even though the Platonic tradition was being kept alive by a only small group of people. In the Arab countries, the Greek heritage was to a large extent also forgotten, even if some continued to read the Arabic translations of Plato, and the writings of Islamic Platonists like Ibn Sina and Al Farabi.

But the Arabs had rediscovered the Greeks also, in the Islamic Renaissance of the Eighth through Eleventh centuries. In A.D. 786, Harun al-Rashid became the fifth Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. During his reign, a project was started to collect Greek manuscripts, translate them, and copy the translations.

Harun al-Rashid died in 809, and his son al-Ma'mun, the new Caliph, continued the patronage of learning started by his father. He founded an academy, called the "House of Wisdom," where Greek philosophical and scientific works were translated. Most of the the work of the academy consisted in searching for manuscripts to translate. In order to find manuscripts of works by Plato and others, al-Ma'mun sent a team of his most learned men to the Byzantine Empire. The Caliph used his military victories to get more manuscripts: During the war with the Byzantine empire the Caliph captured Byzantine soldiers and demanded manuscripts as ransom for them!

Arabic 'Book-Hunters'

One of the scholars who participated in this book-hunt was Abu Zayd Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-Ibadi (808-873), who rightly can be called the Arabic Petrarch.

Hunayn ibn Ishaq is most famous as a translator. He was trained in medicine, and made original contributions to that subject. However, as the leading translator in the House of Wisdom, he came to have an enormous influence on the mathematicians of the time. His son, Ishaq ibn Hunayn, strongly influenced by his father, is famed for the Arabic translation of Euclid's *Elements*.

Hunayn, who was a Nestorian Christian, learned Greek in Alexandria as a young student, and became an expert in the Greek language. He travelled

throughout the Arab world in search of manuscripts. In cooperation with other book-hunters, translations were made into Arabic, and Hunayn personally translated both Plato and Aristotle.

Other translators included the astronomer Thabit Ibn Qurra, Yusuf al-Khuri al-Qass, who translated Archimedes' now lost work on triangles, and Qusta Ibn Luqa al-Ba'lbakki, a Syrian Christian who translated Hypsicles, Theodosius' *Sphaerica*, Heron's *Mechanics*, Autolycus Theophrastus' *Meteora*, Euclid, and several other works.

Transmission Through Spain

Some of the works translated by the House of Wisdom were later translated into Latin by scholars in Toledo, Spain, which from the 900's onward was a center of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholarship. From Toledo, these translations, as well as original writings by Islamic scholars like Ibn Sina and Al Farabi, including the rich treasure of Arabic medicine, were disseminated throughout Europe. But, although this influence was great, it was too limited: Only a very few translations of the Greek Classics, and those mostly of Aristotle, reached Europe. Plato remained unknown in the West, except for some copies of the *Timaeus*, and some commentaries on Plato written by Proclus and Al Farabi.

During the European Renaissance, many writings by Islamic scholars, such as Ibn Sina (known in Europe by the Latinized name "Avicenna"), were translated anew. Many ancient Greek works were also translated into Latin from Arabic. The example of the famous Apollonius of Perga is typical. His *Conics*, which played a crucial role in the development of modern astronomy, was translated from both Greek and Arabic: Its first four Books were translated from Greek, and Books Five, Six, and Seven from Arabic (Book Eight had been lost altogether). Johannes Kepler would later revolutionize astronomy, when he hypothesized that the planets moved along the pathways of elliptical curves described by Apollonius in the *Conics*.

—TJ

hunger, had been taken. Soon, artists like Piero della Francesca, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael Sanzio, to name just a few, would revolutionize painting. The arts developed—and although this development lies beyond the scope of this report, it still positively shapes the daily life of all of us, minute by minute.

The tragedy is, that the development of mankind since the Renaissance has been interrupted repeatedly by unnecessary wars and disasters. The evils that followed in the 1500's, during the so-called “little dark age”—the religious warfare, colonialism, and the horrendous series of wars leading to the the Thirty Years' War, are such examples. The AIDS disaster and the economic crisis today, and World War II with its Nazi terror, are two recent examples.

Instead of using the Aristotelean opposition to stop the Renaissance, its enemies decided to pervert it from within, by introducing a counterculture among the youth. Similar to the counterculture of the 1960's, they insisted on a “revolution of the senses.” The early Renaissance Platonists' focus on the human mind, was to be replaced by an emphasis on sensuality and extra-sensuous, occult, experiences.

Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the arts. The great achievement of the Renaissance was to rediscover linear perspective, and to rediscover ways to portray not only the bodily appearance of people, but also their souls, the “motion of the mind.” After awhile, the Platonic method of painting developed by artists like Piero, Leonardo, and Raphael, was replaced by a sensual revolution. Pornographic painters earned huge sums. It became fashionable to use mythological subjects for the paintings. Why? Because these allowed the painters to depict sexual intercourse between naked men and women, and even children disguised as naked angels!

Many works of the artist Michelangelo clearly show this tendency to emphasize sensuous experience and the athletic appearance of the body, over the mind. Interested readers can compare the paintings of Michelangelo in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, to those of Raphael, also in the Vatican. Perform a thought experiment: How would Michelangelo have painted Raphael's “School of Athens,” where the great intellects of antiquity and modernity are depicted in a dialogue taking place in “temporal eternity”? Would Raphael have painted Christ, God, angels, and the saints, as naked athletes, as Michelangelo did?

Much of this sensuous revolution was falsely labelled Platonism, as in the case of the unfortunate translator of Plato, Marcilio Ficino, whose occult *Platonic Theology*, was anything but Platonic. The seemingly Platonist “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” of Pico della Mirandola (1467-1533), a student of Ficino, which extols the

virtue of man's creative powers, nonetheless shows this tendency. The oration starts out by referring to the hidden wisdom of God, which only a chosen elite among mankind has the capacity to discover. Thus, the dignity of the whole of humanity, has been perverted into the dignity of the few. Or, as Pico writes:

Openly to reveal to the people the hidden mysteries and the secret intentions of the highest divinity, which lay concealed under the hard shell of the law and the rough vesture of language, what else could this be but to throw holy things to dogs and to strew gems among swine? The decision, consequently, to keep such things hidden from the vulgar and to communicate them only to the initiate, among whom alone, as Paul says, wisdom speaks, was not a counsel of human prudence, but a divine command. And the philosophers of antiquity scrupulously observed this caution.²²

All talk about the differences between Aristotle and Plato should cease, Pico states. “We have proposed a harmony between Plato and Aristotle,” where Aristotle would provide the rational method, and Plato a method for magical, cabbalistic investigations.

The Future

Thus followed chaos upon the Renaissance, as in so many other times in the history of mankind.

Humanity ought to have learned the lesson by now: In order to reverse today's economic collapse and ensure that civilization can no longer be threatened by extinction in the future, we need a rebirth, a new Renaissance. But this time, as Lyndon LaRouche has proposed, the Renaissance must be spread by a mass movement, and not merely by the few. That is, as many people as possible must become fully human, and develop their creative capacities in the image of the Creator. This must be done, in order to make the new Renaissance durable, and avoid collapse of civilization in the future.

But to do this, you would have to start seeing yourself as a true human being, and not just as some kind of cattle. Do you believe that you are powerless to change anything—that somehow, unseen forces, or unknowable, powerful interests are directing everything that happens on this planet, and that you cannot do anything to change the future destiny of mankind?

What would Petrarch, sitting at his wooden table that cold September day in 1360, have to say about that? One can almost imagine him lifting his head and pointing towards you. He had seen the follies of his time. He had seen how popular opinion had tolerated the madness of Church and state, which led to the great disaster of the Black Death. He had witnessed how madness spread as a result of the plague,

its survivors either turning toward frenzy, grasping as much sex and debauchery as possible before the plague hit them, or becoming religious fundamentalists, flagellants trudging naked from town to town, whipping themselves and praying constantly. Few had acted with calm, and even fewer had tried to prevent the disaster.

Does man make a difference? Ask Petrarch. Ask Leonardo Bruni, or Plethon, Bessarion, and Cusanus. Look at them, and then look at yourself in the mirror:

APPENDIX

Petrarch, the Language-Maker

Not only was Petrarch instrumental in reviving knowledge of the works of Plato and Classical Greece, but, together with his older contemporary Dante and his younger contemporary Boccaccio, he actually invented the modern Italian language. As a result of their efforts, Italian became the first literate form of a modern European vernacular, a necessary prerequisite for the development of a national language-culture and, hence, a modern nation-state.

The verb “invented” is not too strong. For thousands of years, both before and after the period of Roman dominance, the people of the Italian peninsula spoke an assortment of vernacular dialects. These were not just differences in accent, as we have in America, but idiomatic and syntactical differences so great that they could stand in the way of communication. Educated people wrote in Latin, and Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch were no exception.

Dante realized that the growth of human freedom and the possibility of salvation were hindered by the fact that the most important and elevated thoughts in all of mankind’s history could only be discussed by the learned few in a language almost incomprehensible to the vast majority. Writing with immense courage in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante hurled down a challenge before all of Western civilization: the vernacular tongues are “nobler,” said Dante, than the “artificial” language of the Court and the Schools; we must elevate these vernaculars to the level whereat they can express ideas as well as, or better than, Latin or Greek. Dante’s epic *Commedia* embodies that challenge, and scientifically demonstrates the method of solution.

Dante wrote the *Commedia* in his version of Tuscan, the dialect spoken in his beloved home, Florence. His followers Petrarch and Boccaccio continued the exercise brilliantly, creating a language of powerful musicality which was plastic enough to adopt many of the neologisms and usages that flowed from the pens of these three

What would you have done, if Petrarch had asked you to help him in the mid-1340’s? Would you have turned your back to work on the harvest as usual, or joined the never-ending quarrels about taxes and careers? Would you have said that the future is in the hands of God, and that you could not do anything about it?

Petrarch knew that God was not so stupid, as to create human beings who were some kind of impotent cattle, born only to be slaughtered. But, do you?

writers. In 1515, about 150 years later, the Florentine patriot Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a short dialogue to celebrate this achievement. Machiavelli longed for a unified Italian nation, and a unified Italian language to help bring it about. “A common tongue of Italy” had not yet come into being, concluded Machiavelli, but when it did, the “true source and foundation” of it, would be the work of the Florentine writers, “among whom Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio hold pride of place, to such a degree that no one can hope to rival them.”

Petrarch, Chaucer, and Shakespeare

The Dante-Petrarch-Boccaccio language project was so successful, that its reverberations were heard across Europe, and no place so loud as in England. During the Fourteenth century, England was undergoing its own linguistic turmoil, as the Latinized French of the old Norman oligarchy was giving way to an evolving English vernacular. The pivot of this transformation was to be the courtier and diplomat Geoffrey Chaucer (?1343-1400). An amateur versifier from his twenties, Chaucer was intellectually reborn by a series of diplomatic visits he made to Italy between 1372 and 1378. It is hypothesized, but not proven, that Chaucer met Petrarch in Padua in 1374.

Exposure to the rich harmonies and strong rhythms of Italian verse, and to the imaginative narratives of tale-tellers like Boccaccio, opened Chaucer’s mind to the heights to which he could take his own vernacular. Chaucer’s borrowings from the Florentine trio are too extensive to describe here; it is sufficient to repeat an accolade from Chaucer’s masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, the founding document of modern English verse:

I wol yow telle a tale which that I
Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
As preved by his wordes and his werk.

He is now deed and nayled in his cheste,
 I preye to god so yeve his soule reste!
 Fraunceys Petrark, the laureat poete,
 Highte this clerk, whos rethoryke sweete
 Enlumined al Itallie of poetrye.
 [*Clerk's Prologue*, 26-33]

Chaucer's deep public debt to Petrarch inextricably linked English and Italian poetry for years to come. It soon became almost obligatory for an English gentleman with poetic aspirations to complete his education with a tour of Italy. Two of these "Italianate Englishmen," as they were called, were Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547) from the period of Henry VIII. Wyatt and Surrey embarked on a project to master Petrarch's poetics, translating and adapting many of his poems.

As a result of their project, the two popularized in English the sonnet form most often used by Petrarch (an

8-line octet followed by a 6-line sestet)—which today we call a "Petrarchan sonnet." Surrey experimented with a variation of Petrarch's sonnet, dividing the 14 lines into three 4-line quatrains, followed by a couplet. At the same time, both he and Wyatt emphasized the need to regularize English meter, pointing to the 10-syllable iambic pentameter as the most felicitous analogy to the 11-syllable line favored by the Italians.

But, the greatest "Italianate Englishman" never went to Italy. Fifty years after Surrey and Wyatt, William Shakespeare was inspired by their Petrarchan verse, and wholly adopted Surrey's sonnet form into what we today call the "Shakespearean sonnet." And, following its development in the dramas of his contemporary Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare perfected the iambic pentameter line as the means to give voice to the most beautiful and content-laden English ever heard.

—Michael Minnicino

NOTES

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