

ITALIAN LECTURE

# Leon Battista Alberti and the Redirection of Renaissance Humanism

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IN 1916 MRS ANGELA MOND provided funds for ‘a lecture series on subjects relating to Italian literature, history, art, history of Italian science, Italy’s part in the Renaissance, Italian influences on other countries, or any other theme which the Council may consider as coming within the scope of such a Lecture’. While the subjects of previous British Academy lectures will have been relevant to one or two of the above fields, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) is perhaps unique in being relevant to all of them. Despite that, he has only been the subject of one lecture in recent times, Cecil Grayson’s 1963 lecture to the Academy on Alberti’s *Grammatica* of the Italian vernacular.<sup>1</sup> For that reason alone Battista Alberti would be an appropriate subject for this year’s lecture: but in fact this fifteenth-century polymath is highly relevant to our own times since we live in an age in which the humanities are increasingly taking on interdisciplinary perspectives and are currently much concerned with innovation, both key components of Alberti’s intellectual make-up.

Yet modern scholars face two main problems in dealing with Alberti. The first is that trying to establish what the humanist was really trying to do is like restoring a work of art: we have to remove the accretions and misguided restorations that have taken place over the centuries to return to the original painting, sculpture or building. One of the most influential

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Grayson, ‘Leon Battista Alberti and the beginnings of Italian grammar’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 49 (1964), 291–316.

portraits of the artist was that provided by Jacob Burckhardt in 1860 which was largely modelled on the humanist's Latin autobiography, but carefully rewritten by the Swiss historian in order to accentuate the positive, sunny aspects of his multitalented personality, and to elide the darker, melancholic notes of the authentic source.<sup>2</sup> Burckhardt's picture of what he called a 'Renaissance or universal man' also tended to emphasise Battista's practical talents and physical prowess rather more than his intellectual achievements. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that scholars such as Cecil Grayson and Eugenio Garin began to restore the darker, pessimistic side of Alberti's make-up, particularly the melancholic dimension that emerged from Latin works such as the *Intercenales*, a new manuscript of which was discovered in the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Joan Kelly Gadol's 1969 volume emphasised the artistic rather than the literary side of the man, but after her monograph there was a striking lull of three decades before Anthony Grafton's book at the end of the last century.<sup>4</sup> This volume and Grafton's other studies have refocused our attention on Alberti's scholarly credentials.<sup>5</sup> Now in the last decade, and especially since the sixth centenary of the author's birth in 2004, the bibliography on the humanist has increased exponentially: at least six major conferences and four exhibitions, as well as new editions of works, have led to the publication of almost twenty substantial volumes.<sup>6</sup> Thus more has been written on Alberti in the last ten years than in

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, new intro. by P. Burke, notes by P. Murray (Harmondsworth, 1990), esp. pp. 102–4.

<sup>3</sup> The manuscript containing many new *Intercenales* was published by Eugenio Garin: Leon Battista Alberti, *Intercenali inedite*, ed. Eugenio Garin, *Rinascimento*, 4 (1964), 125–258; for a more balanced view of both the 'sunny' and 'dark' sides of Alberti see also Garin's 'Il pensiero di Leon Battista Alberti: caratteri e contrasti', *Rinascimento*, 12 (1972), 3–20; for Grayson's work, see now the collection of his articles in Cecil Grayson, *Studi su Leon Battista Alberti*, a cura di P. Claut (Florence, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Joan Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti. Universal Man of the Early Renaissance* (Chicago and London, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Grafton, 'Leon Battista Alberti: the writer as reader', in his *Commerce with the Classics. Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997), pp. 53–92; id., *Leon Battista Alberti. Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance* (Harmondsworth, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Amongst the conference proceedings, see *Leon Battista Alberti. Architettura e cultura. Atti del Convegno internazionale, Mantova, 16–19 novembre 1994* (Florence, 1999); *Leon Battista Alberti: Actes du congrès international de Paris (10–15 avril 1995)*, ed. Francesco Furlan *et al.*, 2 vols. (Paris and Turin, 2000); *Leon Battista Alberti e il Quattrocento. Studi in onore di Cecil Grayson e Ernst Gombrich. Atti del Convegno internazionale, Mantova, 29–31 ottobre 1998*, ed. L. Chiavoni, G. Ferlisi, M. V. Grassi (Florence, 2001); *Leon Battista Alberti teorico delle arti e gli impegni civili del 'De Re Aedificatoria'*, ed. A. Calzona, F. P. Fiore, A. Tenenti, C. Vasoli, 2 vols. (Florence, 2007); *La vita e il mondo di Leon Battista Alberti. Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato*

the previous half-millennium.<sup>7</sup> Two main aims of this lecture, then, are to suggest a way of returning to the essence of Alberti's humanism while at the same time bearing in mind the most recent scholarship.

The second problem facing today's Albertian scholars stems from the increasing specialisation of scholarship: this means that conferences on this multifaceted writer, theorist and architect are still split into different areas of expertise, broadly speaking the literary and the artistic or practical sides of the humanist's output. Grayson pointed out at the start of his British Academy lecture the risk that Alberti might seem broad but not deep in his interests, since he was a wide-ranging writer who might have been accused of being an amateur, but he added: 'though his range was broad, covering both literary and scientific subjects, his learning and understanding were no less profound'.<sup>8</sup> Battista cultivated an unparalleled range of literary and other genres in both Latin and the Tuscan vernacular, but today it is just the tip of the Alberti iceberg that is studied and taught: in UK Italian and history departments we study mostly *De familia*, art historians read *De pictura*, architectural historians research *De re aedificatoria*. These are the only three works that are studied in our undergraduate courses. How many Italianists can say they have read not just all the Latin works, but even the other three vernacular dialogues? Perhaps it is for this reason that conferences have proliferated, and the interdisciplinary nature of such gatherings means that conference proceedings are perhaps a better way of approaching this 'chameleon-like'

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*Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti (Genova, 19–21 febbraio 2004)*, 2 vols. (Florence, 2008); *Leon Battista Alberti e la tradizione. Per lo 'smontaggio' dei mosaici albertiani. Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti (Arezzo, 23–24–25 settembre 2004)*, ed. Roberto Cardini, Mariangela Regoliosi, 2 vols. (Florence, 2008); *Alberti e la cultura del Quattrocento. Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti (Firenze, 16–17–18 dicembre 2004)*, ed. Roberto Cardini, Mariangela Regoliosi, 2 vols. (Florence, 2008); *Leon Battista Alberti umanista e scrittore. Filologia, esegesi, tradizione. Atti dei Convegni internazionali del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti (Arezzo, 24–25–26 giugno 2004)*, ed. Roberto Cardini, Mariangela Regoliosi, 2 vols. (Florence, 2008). Amongst the exhibition catalogues, see *La Roma di Leon Battista Alberti. Umanisti, architetti e artisti alla scoperta dell'antico nella città del Quattrocento*, ed. Francesco Paolo Fiore with Arnold Nesselrath (Milan, 2005); *Leon Battista Alberti. La biblioteca di un umanista*, ed. Roberto Cardini with L. Bertolini, M. Regoliosi (Florence, 2005); *Leon Battista Alberti e l'architettura*, ed. Massimo Bulgarelli, Arturo Calzona, Matteo Ceriana, Francesco Paolo Fiore (Milan, 2006); *L'uomo del Rinascimento. Leon Battista Alberti e le arti a Firenze tra ragione e bellezza*, ed. Cristina Acidini, Gabriele Morolli (Florence, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Roberto Cardini, 'Alberti scrittore e umanista', in *La vita e il mondo di Leon Battista Alberti*, I, 23–40 (24).

<sup>8</sup> Grayson, 'Leon Battista Alberti and the beginnings of Italian grammar', p. 291.

writer.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the best scholarship ought to take account of both the intellectual and the practical Alberti, the writer of literary and technical works, the Latin and vernacular author. My own approach follows Grafton's to a certain extent, in stressing the highly refined literary author, a humanist steeped in an almost unparalleled range of classical texts, but whereas Grafton's methodology has its centre of gravity in the history of ideas, my aim here is more literary, paying close attention to Alberti's sources, for as a genuine humanist he was an avid reader of classical literature and, as in Petrarch and other exponents of Renaissance humanism, what Alberti read explains what he wrote.

I want to begin by looking at the very different ways in which Alberti develops humanism in the century after Petrarch. In order to do so we should first remind ourselves of what Renaissance humanism consisted in. There is a helpful recent definition of it provided by Nicholas Mann: 'Humanism [. . .] involves above all the rediscovery and study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, the restoration and interpretation of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values they contain.'<sup>10</sup> In this definition there are three sequential elements: first, the (re-)discovery and restoration of classical texts; second, their study or interpretation; and thirdly, the assimilation of their ideas and values. In what follows I want to consider to what extent Alberti embraced Petrarch's enthusiasm for these three elements, the recovery and analysis of classical texts, as well as the emulation of their values; what will emerge, I think, is that his interests were focused less on the first element, philological restoration of texts, and more on the other two, analysis and assimilation of their content and values, but in addition we will see that he moved outwards towards a much wider range of disciplines than his predecessor. This enlargement of his interests had important consequences, resulting in attitudes that distanced him substantially from Petrarch. But let us start by simply comparing their lives and literary works.

<sup>9</sup> Cristoforo Landino was one of the first to apply the image to Alberti: 'come nuovo camaleonta sempre quello colore piglia il quale è nella cosa della quale scrive' — see Cristoforo Landino, *Scritti critici e teorici*, ed. Roberto Cardini, 2 vols. (Rome, 1974), I, 120. On this topos in Alberti criticism, see now Gabriella Albanese's fine survey, 'Leon Battista Alberti nella storiografia letteraria e artistica dell'Umanesimo e del Rinascimento', *Rinascimento*, 47 (2007), 49–91.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Mann, 'The origins of humanism', in J. Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1–19 (2).

## Petrarch and Alberti

There are striking similarities between Alberti and Petrarch. David Marsh in a 1985 article pointed out many of them.<sup>11</sup> Born in the fourth year of their respective centuries, of Florentine fathers in exile, both men died in the eighth decade of the Tre and Quattrocento. Each studied law at Bologna, took minor orders, and enjoyed the income from ecclesiastical benefices throughout their life. Both were creatively inspired by the sight of the ruins of ancient Rome, travelled widely within Italy, and found patronage in the Northern Italian courts. The first work by each was a Latin comedy in which characters had names that were personifications of abstract qualities. Both wrote works complaining about the mercantile, anti-literary culture that surrounded them. And while Petrarch received a laurel crown in Rome in 1341, exactly a hundred years later, in 1441, Alberti organised a literary competition in Florence where the prize was a silver laurel wreath for the best vernacular work on the theme of friendship.

Nevertheless, the differences between the two humanists are more illuminating than their points of convergence. The condition of being born in exile appears to have weighed more heavily on Alberti than on Petrarch: in the former's case the condition of exile was further exacerbated by being born illegitimate, and Alberti stresses on several occasions, especially in the dialogue *De familia*, the travails brought upon his family by their exile. The Albertis were exiled from Florence in 1401 and only allowed to return in 1428, a period corresponding to Battista's early life up to his twenty-fourth year.<sup>12</sup> Another difference in outlook is their attitude to the canon of classical authors to be studied. Alberti's more open attitude particularly to 'scientific' writers derives from the breadth of his education: he tells us in his Latin autobiography that when he became ill through excessive study of literature and law, he turned to physics or philosophy and mathematics. There is a dispute as to whether the abbreviated form 'p̄ham' found in the best manuscript of the *Vita* stands for 'ph[ysic]am' or 'ph[ilosophi]am', though most scholars now opt for the latter, which probably meant 'natural philosophy' (i.e. studying Aristotle's *Physica*, *De coelo*, *De*

<sup>11</sup> David Marsh, 'Petrarch and Alberti', in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Craig Hugh Smyth*, ed. A. Morrogh *et al.*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1985), I, 363–75.

<sup>12</sup> On the Alberti family exile, see the first chapter of Girolamo Mancini, *Vita di Leon Battista Alberti* (Florence, 1882), pp. 1–20, later revised in the 2nd edn. (Rome, 1911), pp. 1–16; more recently see the first chapter of Luca Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze. Biografia, storia, letteratura* (Florence, 2000), pp. 3–67.

*anima*).<sup>13</sup> In a sense the reading does not matter, since for Aristotelians physics and natural philosophy are the same thing, and either of them would imply a substantial broadening of his education away from strictly literary and legal disciplines—indeed we shall see when we look at his own works that what counted was the second term, ‘*mathematicas artes*’. It is this ‘mathematical turn’ in Alberti that makes him so different from the founder of humanism. In fact Battista’s capacity to ‘turn’, especially in pursuit of innovative fields of enquiry, is a key characteristic of his intellectual temperament. Petrarch on the other hand hardly ever mentions mathematics as a subject and his aversion to the natural sciences is well known: in a famous passage of his invective *De sui ipsius et aliorum ignorantia* (c.1371) he argues that it is misguided to know how many hairs a lion has in its mane, how many feathers a hawk has in its tail, how elephants mate and so on, all details found in Pliny’s *Natural History* and medieval encyclopedias.<sup>14</sup> For Alberti, on the other hand, Pliny will be one of his most quoted authors, and the humanist’s treatise on horses, *De equo animante* (c.1444), deals with precisely the kind of topic from natural science and uses exactly the scholastic sources that Petrarch abhorred. Similarly in Petrarch’s *Invective against a Detractor of Italy* (1373) he attacks his Aristotelian opponent for asking why Cicero had not written a *Physics* or Varro a *Metaphysics*, claiming that this detractor is only happy when he is spouting Greek titles.<sup>15</sup> This dismissal of certain aspects of Greek culture opens up another difference between the two humanists. In short, as I have suggested elsewhere, Alberti’s canon of authors differs from that of Petrarch and other humanist predecessors in four main areas: his interests in ‘scientific’ texts; his knowledge of Greek literature; his insistence on the humorous component in many of his writings; and his stylistically anti-Ciceronian Latin.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For the text of the *Vita*, see Riccardo Fubini and A. Menci Gallorini (eds.), ‘L’autobiografia di Leon Battista Alberti. Studio e edizione’, *Rinascimento*, 12 (1972), 21–78 (70). The interpretation ‘philosophy’ is maintained by Lucia Cesarini Martinelli, in her edition of the *Philodoxeos Fabula*, *Rinascimento*, 17 (1977), 111–234 (112–13, n. 2), by Luca Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze*, p. 72, n. 4, and by David Lines, ‘Leon Battista Alberti e lo studio di Bologna negli anni venti’, in *La vita e il mondo di Leon Battista Alberti*, cit., II, 387; in addition Alberti himself uses the abbreviation ‘p̄hum’ to mean ‘philosophum’ in his autograph letter to the philosopher Crates: see *Leon Battista Alberti. La biblioteca di un umanista*, p. 208, Tavola 32.

<sup>14</sup> Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, ed. and trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, MA, 2003), p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> Petrarca, *Invectives*, cit., pp. 450, 454.

<sup>16</sup> Martin McLaughlin, ‘Alberti and the classical canon’, in Carlo Caruso and Andrew Laird (eds.), *Italy and the Classical Tradition. Language, Thought and Poetry 1300–1600* (London, 2009), pp. 73–100.

Apart from these questions of their education and their attitude to the canon, another fundamental difference between the two men is that Petrarch's synthesis of humanism and Christianity finds very little echo in the later humanist: it is true that Battista does write in Latin the *Vita Sancti Potiti* (c.1433) and a dialogue on the duties of a bishop (*Pontifex*, c.1437),<sup>17</sup> but these are brief, early works whose Christian tone is totally absent in Alberti's major outputs. The difference emerges most strikingly in the two writers' autobiographies: Petrarch's *Letter to Posterity* (c.1350, revised 1370) is structured around an Augustinian model of sin and repentance, and indeed opens with a list of the subject's differing levels of propensity to the seven deadly sins; Alberti's *Vita* (c.1438), on the other hand, is totally secular, there is no mention of God or sin, and the major underlying model is a classical one, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* (it even ends, like many of Diogenes' lives, with a list of the subject's famous sayings): it is a portrait of the artist not as an Augustine-like repentant but as a Stoic philosopher. Other fundamental differences emerge simply by looking at the prolific output of both men.

If we just examine the list of works by both writers, what instantly stands out is that while Alberti did not write any poetry in Latin himself, he adapts several Latin poetic genres that Petrarch had embraced and transfers them to the *volgare*: in his few vernacular poems we see that where Petrarch had revived classical pastoral poetry with his *Bucolicum Carmen*, Alberti wrote the first vernacular eclogues;<sup>18</sup> Petrarch wrote Latin elegiac verse and Battista wrote the first elegies in *terza rima*;<sup>19</sup> and if Petrarch had written a number of poems in Latin hexameters, Alberti was the first to accommodate Italian vernacular poetry to the classical hexameter rhythm.<sup>20</sup>

The same tendency to 'transfer' is found in his prose works. Petrarch first, and humanists such as Leonardo Bruni later, had revived the

<sup>17</sup> See the recent edition: Leon Battista Alberti, *Pontifex*, ed. A. Piccardi (Florence, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> 'Corimbus' and 'Tirsis', in Leon Battista Alberti, *Opere volgari*, ed. Cecil Grayson, 3 vols. (Bari, 1960–73), II, 22–7 (henceforth *OV*, with volume and page number). See also C. Grayson, 'Alberti and the vernacular eclogue in the Quattrocento', *Italian Studies*, 11 (1956), 16–29, now in C. Grayson, *Studi su Leon Battista Alberti*, pp. 103–18.

<sup>19</sup> 'Mirzia' and 'Agilitta', in *OV*, II, 11–21. In fact Petrarch's metrical epistles, the *Metrice*, may have inspired Alberti to write vernacular verse epistles, though only one couplet of them survives, cited by Vasari: see Giorgio Vasari, 'Leonbatista Alberti, Architetto fiorentino', in *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue, insino a' giorni nostri. Nell'edizione per i tipi di Lorenzo Torrentino*, Firenze 1550, ed. L. Bellosi, A. Rossi, 2 vols. (Turin, 1986), I, 354–58 (356).

<sup>20</sup> Alberti's poem 'De amicitia', written for the Certame, is in *OV*, II, 45.

Ciceronian dialogue in Latin, indeed it had become the prestige genre of Latin humanists in the first half of the Quattrocento.<sup>21</sup> However, Alberti wrote just one brief dialogue in Latin (*Pontifex*), but went on to write the first ever ethical dialogues in the Italian vernacular, four of them altogether. His first substantial work was the *De familia* (1433–7), a Ciceronian dialogue in Tuscan, an extraordinary novelty at the time, and it is interesting to note that the one explicit model that Alberti names as inspiring one of the four books is not Cicero (which might have invited invidious comparisons), but the Greek writer Xenophon, and the adjectives used to describe him ('nudo, simplice . . . dolcissimo e suavissimo') show that Alberti is aiming not at the highest but at a middle rhetorical style.<sup>22</sup> This was a completely original initiative, especially as vernacular prose up until that point had only been used for urban chronicles or *novelle*, not works of high literature. He also wrote his first technical work, *De pictura* (1435–6), in Italian, consciously providing a treatise on painting for the first time in the new language to match the lost works by ancient artists and writers such as Apelles and others.<sup>23</sup> In addition, as Grayson showed us, his *Grammatichetta* did for the Tuscan *volgare* what Priscian had done for Latin. This systematic transferral of genres from the learned language to the vernacular accounts for Cristoforo Landino's praise of Alberti as the writer who had expanded the popular language by 'transferring' all sorts of elegance and dignity from Latin texts to the *volgare*.<sup>24</sup>

In his Latin works we find many short pieces: *brevitas* was one of his favourite stylistic ideals. Thus, despite the fame of Petrarch's *Africa* and *Trionfi*, Alberti has no time for epic poetry in either language. However, after about 1442 there appears to be a shift from short narrative texts towards more technical works, such as the *Descriptio urbis Romae* (1446–7), *De statua* (1450), and *De componendis cyfris* (1466). His mathematical

<sup>21</sup> David Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue. Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation* (Cambridge, MA, 1980).

<sup>22</sup> Martin L. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance. The Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 160–1.

<sup>23</sup> '[W]e are not writing a history of painting like Pliny, but treating of the art in an entirely new way. On this subject there exist today none of the writings of the ancients [. . .]': Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson, with an Introduction by Martin Kemp (Harmondsworth, 1991), pp. 61–2. For the Italian original of book 2.26, see *OV*, II, 46–8.

<sup>24</sup> 'Ma uomo che più industria abbi messo in ampliare questa lingua che Batista Alberti certo credo che nessuno si truovi. Legete, priego, e' libri suoi e molti e di varie cose composti, attendete con quanta industria ogni eleganzia, composizione e dignità che appresso a' Latini si truova si sia ingegnato a noi transferire' (Landino, *Scritti critici e teorici*, I, 35–6).



interests and use of measuring instruments are well to the fore in all three works, though they were also evident in the first book of *De pictura*. His three most ambitious compositions in Latin, however, are the ten books of short Lucianic ‘dinner-pieces’ known as the *Intercenales* (c.1432–40), the four-book satirical ‘novel’ *Momus* (1443–53) and the ten-book architecture treatise, *De re aedificatoria* (1443–52). As in the vernacular works, here too he is motivated by the pursuit of originality: if the *Intercenales* are modelled on Lucian, a ‘new’ author at the time, and represent a genre that was up till then totally lacking in Latin literature, and the architectural treatise was inspired by Vitruvius’ *De architectura*, *Momus* is possibly the most original work of all, and certainly the first modern ‘novel’ in Latin. These are three substantial works that give an idea of the importance of those two major strands in Alberti: the humorous work, and the technical treatise. In the latter genre he eventually wrote a total of eight treatises on quite original topics (on painting (two), sculpture, architecture, the buildings of Rome, horses, mathematics and cryptography). Thus if in the vernacular the dominant note of his major works, the dialogues, is ethical, in Latin the two main strands of his output are the humorous and the technical. While he shares with Petrarch a concern for the ethical dimension, his cult of humorous and technical works is far removed from the interests of his great predecessor and most of his humanist contemporaries. Alberti clearly changes the direction of humanism: he extends the confines of the two languages, vertically elevating the vernacular by writing in it philosophical dialogues, and horizontally broadening Latin by expanding it to include humorous and technical subjects.

### Recovery of ancient texts

I want now to look in more depth at Petrarch’s and Alberti’s attitudes to the main concepts of Renaissance humanism, as outlined above. Perhaps the most important aspect here is what was called the recovery and restoration of classical texts, either the discovery of works that were wholly or partially unknown to the middle ages, or the restoration of more accurate manuscripts of works that were already known. Here Petrarch, as is well known, played a prime role. By 1330 he had put together in Avignon the most complete and accurate text of the three decades of Livy’s *History of Rome* that had survived; in Liège in 1333 he discovered Cicero’s speech *Pro Archia*, a speech that was fundamental for the concept of the ‘*studia humanitatis*’ or humanism; and in 1345 he discovered Cicero’s *Letters to*

*Atticus* in the Capitular library at Verona, a discovery that would inspire Petrarch to collect his own letters to his friends. Petrarch's discoveries would inspire the great manuscript hunters of the fifteenth century: the period from 1416 to 1429, while Alberti was studying first with Gasparino Barzizza at Padua and later at Bologna university, has been called the 'heroic age' of humanist recovery of the classical heritage, for it was then that many new texts came to light.<sup>25</sup> In 1416–17 the complete texts of Quintilian, Lucretius, Manilius, Columella and Silius Italicus were discovered or recovered, thanks largely to the researches of Poggio Bracciolini.<sup>26</sup> In 1421 Gherardo Landriani unearthed at Lodi the important Cicero manuscript containing the complete texts of *De Oratore* and *Orator*, as well as the *Brutus*, a work entirely unknown to the middle ages.<sup>27</sup> It was Alberti's teacher, Barzizza, along with Flavio Biondo, who helped disseminate these new rhetorical works of Cicero to other Italian humanists in the 1420s.<sup>28</sup> Lastly in 1429 the manuscript containing twelve new comedies by Plautus arrived in Italy.<sup>29</sup>

What was Alberti's attitude to this key feature of humanism, the recovery of ancient texts? Unlike Petrarch, he did not actually discover any manuscripts but he clearly digested the import of recent discoveries: Cicero's *Brutus* was perhaps the most influential Ciceronian text for Alberti's thought, Quintilian's treatise on the orator clearly shaped *De pictura*, Plautus was a major source for the comic writings, while Pliny and Vitruvius inspired his technical works. Other 'new' texts, such as Lucretius, Manilius, Silius Italicus, Martial and even Tacitus, quickly find their way even into his vernacular dialogues.<sup>30</sup> Similarly with Greek literature, he clearly read some works in the Greek original: he quoted, for instance, from Herodotus in his very first vernacular dialogue, *De familia*, and since the first Latin translation of Herodotus was completed by Lorenza Valla only in 1452, it is certain that Alberti had read it in the original Greek. The fact that he quoted from Herodotus' *Histories* in a work written in the vernacular shows Alberti once more 'transferring' the

<sup>25</sup> See L. D. Reynolds, N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1991), p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> L. D. Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission: a Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 146–7 (Columella), 221 (Lucretius), 235 (Manilius), 333 (Quintilian), and 389 (Silius Italicus).

<sup>27</sup> See R. Sabbadini, *Le scoperte dei codici latini e greci ne' secoli XIV e XV*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1905), I, 100–1; Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission*, pp. 102, 107–8.

<sup>28</sup> R. G. G. Mercer, *The Teachings of Gasparino Barzizza. With Special Reference to his Place in Paduan Humanism* (London, 1979), pp. 74–5, 132.

<sup>29</sup> Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission*, p. 304.

<sup>30</sup> See McLaughlin, 'Alberti and the classical canon', cit., p. 87

riches of the ancient world to the modern one. Later dialogues would continue to borrow as much (if not more) from Greek authors as from Latin, such as Xenophon, Plato, Plutarch and even Hippocrates.

Although he was no discoverer of new manuscripts, then, his early education had been at the Paduan school of Barzizza, the foremost Cicero scholar of the day. Barzizza had helped to decipher and disseminate the *Brutus* in the early 1420s, and Alberti's own copy of it is in the Marciana library in Venice.<sup>31</sup> This Ciceronian dialogue was of crucial importance in a number of ways: first, it shed light on the history and development of Latin oratory from the earliest times to Cicero's own day; second, it provided the techniques and technical terms for humanists wanting to write literary criticism in Latin.<sup>32</sup> So Battista had his own copy of this 'new' text, and, as has been shown, he studied it thoroughly and highlighted in his works key concepts from Cicero's dialogue.<sup>33</sup> The main lessons he learnt from it were: the cult of a constant work-ethic, attributed to both Hortensius and Cicero in the dialogue; his interest in the education of the writer, painter or architect; the idea that all arts progress and develop over time, that nothing is born already perfect (*'Et nescio an reliquis in rebus omnibus idem eveniat: nihil est enim simul et inventum et perfectum'*, *Brutus* 71; echoed at the end of *De pictura*: *'Simul enim ortum atque perfectum nihil esse aiunt'*, *OV*, III, 106–7), hence the phrase 'in dies' ('day after day') which recurs so often in his works; the notion that not just oratory as a whole has a diachronic development but also that within the one orator or writer there is a development and variety of style; and the view that both the populace and the experts share the same aesthetic sense about what good oratory is. Alberti digested the main lessons of this 'new' text and returned to them throughout his life. In fact it is clear that he remained extremely au fait with all the classical textual discoveries being made in his lifetime, and he was keen to introduce such texts into his works, both vernacular and Latin, thus ensuring a dissemination of the latest humanist discoveries amongst humanist and non-humanist readers.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> For a description of MS Marciana, Lat.XI.67 (3859), see Maria Luisa Tanganelli, 'Scheda 62', *Leon Battista Alberti. La biblioteca di un umanista*, cit., pp. 404–5.

<sup>32</sup> See the introduction to Pauli Cortesii, *De hominibus doctis*, ed. G. Ferrà (Messina: Centro di Studi Umanistici, Università di Messina, 1979), pp. 5–55.

<sup>33</sup> On the significance of Cicero for Alberti, see Martin McLaughlin, 'Alberti e le opere retoriche di Cicerone', in *Leon Battista Alberti e la tradizione*, pp. 181–210.

<sup>34</sup> See M. Regoliosi, 'Per un catalogo degli *auctores* latini dell'Alberti', in *Leon Battista Alberti. La biblioteca di un umanista*, cit., pp. 105–13: 'Si può dire che non ci sia recente scoperta che non sia stata da lui "annusata" e riutilizzata. [...] anche la lettura dei latini risulta aggiornatissima'

Recent scholarship has provided an edition of a letter from the humanist Enoch of Ascoli to Alberti in 1451 sending him an epistle by the late antique writer Sidonius Apollinaris (*Letters* 2.2) which he had found in Røskilde, in Denmark.<sup>35</sup> The date fits with the time when the *De re aedificatoria* was being written, and Sidonius's missive is a detailed description in technical Latin of his villa and baths near Lac Aydat in the Auvergne, even though it is not clear that the letter influenced the architectural treatise in any way. Still Alberti would have appreciated Sidonius's technical language, and he may also have been inspired by the description of Sidonius' villa and its baths to draw up the plan for a baths complex, possibly for the palace at Urbino, another recent discovery in Alberti studies.<sup>36</sup> So Battista was not a discoverer of texts but he was close to those who were, like Poggio and Enoch, and he quickly brought them to the attention of his readers.

In addition, although he made no new manuscript discoveries, Alberti was driven in many of his works by the desire to write modern versions of ancient texts, either of ones that he had read—thus his early reading of Cicero's *De amicitia* lies behind the subject matter of *De familia* book 4, while the *Theogenius* is a vernacular version of *De senectute*—or of works that had been lost, such as the treatises on painting attributed to ancient writers and artists. In fact in some places he uses the language and metaphors of the great manuscript-hunters: his early comedy, *Philodoxus* (1424, revised 1436–7), he passed off as being written by a classical writer and transcribed from an ancient manuscript and 'recovered from exile';<sup>37</sup> and at the end of book 2 of *De pictura* he exploits first the metaphor of exhumation, then the Platonic notion of deriving ideas from the heavens: 'However, whether, if it was once written about by others, we have rediscovered this art of painting and restored it to light from the dead, or whether, if it was never treated before, we have brought it down from

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(p. 107 'one can say there is hardly any recent discovery he did not "sample" subsequently and re-employ. [. . .] His reading of the Latin authors too is utterly up-to-date'); Martin McLaughlin, 'Alberti and the classical canon', cit.

<sup>35</sup> For the text of the letter see Ida Mastrorosa's edition and translation of 'Enochi Asculani Epistula Baptistae de Albertis, Rome', *Albertiana*, 5 (2002), 191–236.

<sup>36</sup> For an image and description of the architectural drawing, discovered by Howard Burns, see Lucia Bertolini, 'Scheda 51', in *Leon Battista Alberti. La biblioteca di un umanista*, cit., pp. 367–8, and relative bibliography; also Robert Tavernor, *On Alberti and the Art of Building* (New Haven, CT, 1998), pp. 194–200.

<sup>37</sup> See Alberti's introduction to his revised redaction of the comedy in *Humanist Comedies*, ed. and transl. Gary R. Grund (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp. 70–82 (76–8).

heaven, let us go on [. . .].<sup>38</sup> An analogous motivation lies behind his *De re aedificatoria*: he clearly did not discover the manuscript of Vitruvius—it was also known to Petrarch<sup>39</sup>—but for Alberti the text might as well not have existed, so corrupt and unintelligible was it.<sup>40</sup> He tried therefore to make sense of it and critically reinterpret it in writing his own modern version of an architectural treatise. Here one can make a direct comparison with Petrarch since we have his annotations on *De architectura*: whereas the latter deal mostly with textual readings, historical cross-references and moralising comments, Alberti absorbs Vitruvius' ideas on ancient architecture but strongly criticises the author for not being intelligible (*facilis*' was one of Alberti's consistent stylistic ideals). In addition to intelligibility, Alberti also pursued something more physical than texts, namely the precise measurements of ancient buildings and monuments, from which he could learn as much if not more than from any text (e.g. II, 4, p. 111; III, 16, p. 257). In this practical side of his character Battista is more an antiquarian than a philologist, a discoverer of antique remains rather than ancient texts.<sup>41</sup>

### Study and analysis of texts

How did Alberti read? Anthony Grafton's fine essay on Battista's reading habits<sup>42</sup> redressed the imbalance conveyed by Burckhardt in his nineteenth-century picture of Alberti, which had emphasised the non-bookish side of his personality.<sup>43</sup> The historian showed him to be every bit as meticulous a reader as his humanist contemporaries, and correctly noted Battista's sensitivity to Latin lexis in his own works: 'It has become clear that

<sup>38</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, cit., 85. 'Noi vero, i quali, se mai da altri fu scritta, abbiamo cavato quest'arte di sotterra, o se non mai fu scritta, l'abbiamo tratta di cielo'; in the Latin version he adds to the first metaphor the notion of searching and returning something from the underworld into the light: 'Nos autem qui hanc picturae artem seu ab aliis olim descriptam ab inferis repetitam in lucem restituumus, sive numquam a quoquam tractatam a superis deduximus' (emphasis mine: *OV*, III, 86–7).

<sup>39</sup> See Pierre De Nolhac, *Pétrarque et l'humanisme*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1907), II, 105, 240, and Lucia A. Ciapponi, 'Il *De architectura* di Vitruvio nel primo Rinascimento', *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica*, 3 (1960), 59–99.

<sup>40</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *L'architettura [De re aedificatoria]*, a cura di G. Orlandi, P. Portoghesi, 2 vols. (Milan, 1966), book VI, 1 (p. 441).

<sup>41</sup> Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1988).

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Grafton, 'Leon Battista Alberti: the writer as reader', cit.

<sup>43</sup> Especially Grafton, pp. 53–5.

Alberti picked his Latin words and phrases with a watchmaker's delicate precision from a wide range of sources, some of them newly discovered.<sup>44</sup> But how did this process work? Alberti was clearly not as concerned with the philological restoration of texts as Petrarch, even though at an early stage of his life there is some evidence of such interests.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the few classical manuscripts that have survived from Battista's library are not covered with cross-references as Petrarch's are. There are very few annotations, and the few there are initially seem rather obvious: at *De amicitia* 19–22, where Cicero notes that friendship is intimately connected with virtue, Battista notes in the margin '*laus amicitie*', and in the *Brutus* he writes in the margin '*laus oratoris*', at the point where the virtues of Licinius Crassus' oratory are being extolled (*Brutus* 143–4). These seem insignificant, but on closer examination of these highlighted passages we will see they held a particular resonance for Alberti.

The passage in praise of friendship begins with the phrase 'Let us then discuss these things in a rough and ready way (*Agamus igitur pingui ut aiunt Minerva*).' Cicero's phrase '*pingui Minerva*' (literally 'fat wisdom') meant a practical, rough and ready approach to a subject, as opposed to that of the Stoic philosophers who had been mentioned in the previous sentence (*De amicitia*, 18) as quibbling in an over-subtle ('*subtilius*', literally 'rather thin') manner. Petrarch too had noticed this phrase in that fundamental Cicero text, but predictably he viewed the practical manner as a negative method: thus in his *Invective against a Physician* (1355) he says to his opponent that he will deal with the subject in a rough and ready way, but only because that is what his opponent's crude intelligence demands.<sup>46</sup> For Alberti, on the other hand, the phrase epitomises his poetics, his deliberately undetailed philosophising, his '*ragionare domestico*' in the vernacular dialogues, and indeed he uses Cicero's very phrase at the start of *De pictura* (*OV*, III, 10–11). There he states that he will write as a painter rather than a mathematician, since the latter deals with the measurements of things in the mind, whereas 'we, on the other hand, who wish to talk about things that are visible will express ourselves in

<sup>44</sup> Grafton, p. 58.

<sup>45</sup> See his comments about the unreliability of sources for his *Vita Sancti Potiti*, in *Opuscoli inediti di Leon Battista Alberti*. '*Musca*', '*Vita S. Potiti*', ed. Cecil Grayson (Florence, 1954), pp. 86–7.

<sup>46</sup> 'So let us proceed "with a slow-witted Minerva", as the ancient proverb says: for that is what your slow wit requires (Agamus itaque iuxta vetus proverbium: "Pinguī Minerva"; sic enim pingue tuum poscit ingenium)' (Petraerca, *Invectives*, cit., pp. 78–9).

cruder terms (*pinguiore Minerva*).<sup>47</sup> Throughout all his writings Alberti adopts this poetics of practical communication as opposed to writing in the highest style (hence his emphasis on communicability and his criticism of Vitruvius).

In fact, this humanist uncharacteristically valued the sheer content of many writers over and above their literary style. Hence his praise, in the first book of *De familia*, of ‘scientific’ writers even if they did not write the best Latin: pupils should read them for the ‘sciences’ they profess.<sup>48</sup> This also explains his cultivation of a familiar style in all his dialogues, a ‘*ragionare domestico*’, which is defined in book 2 of *De familia* as being ‘without any exquisite or excessively polished way of speaking, since what we need is good advice rather than elegance of speech’.<sup>49</sup> He makes the same point about content in other literary works, as well as in his technical treatises.<sup>50</sup> In the dedicatory letter accompanying *De equo animante* (c.1444), he provides a lengthy list of his Greek and Latin sources, from Xenophon to Hippocrates and from Cato to scholastic authors such as Albertus Magnus, and then adds that he has also consulted some French and Tuscan writers ‘who may be less noble but are useful and expert in the subject’, and he also draws ‘from the best medical writers the information that seemed to be relevant’.<sup>51</sup> Similarly at the start of book 3 of the treatise, he states that writers such as Albertus Magnus have written

<sup>47</sup> *On Painting*, cit., p. 37. The original Italian and Latin phrases were ‘useremo quanto dicono più grassa Minerva’; ‘pinguiore idcirco, ut aiunt, Minerva scribendo utemur’ (*OV*, III, 10–11).

<sup>48</sup> ‘Cerchisi la lingua latina in quelli e’ quali l’ebbono netta e perfettissima; negli altri toglianci l’altre scienze delle quali e’ fanno professione’ (*OV*, I, 71).

<sup>49</sup> ‘ragioneremo quanto potremo aperto e domestico, senza alcuna esquisita e troppo elimata ragione di dire, perché tra noi mi pare si richiegga buone sentenze che leggiadria di parlare’ (*OV*, I, 105).

<sup>50</sup> In the *Vita* it is stated that ‘he [so] appreciated the exposition of a notion in any discipline that he asserted that even bad writers were worthy of praise (et in quavis re expositam historiam <tanti> faciebat, ut etiam malos scriptores dignos laude asseveraret)’: see Fubini and Menci Gallorini, ‘L’autobiografia’, p. 77. Similarly in the Proem to book 7 of the *Intercenales*, after admitting that very few ancient writers managed to write like Cicero, he notes that ‘all of them are still constantly read and appreciated’, which is why he himself ‘thinks highly of those who make any contribution to knowledge that delights us in whatever style it is written (tamen omnes lectitantur et in delitiis habentur. Ea de re illos ego hac etate haudquaquam esse aspernandos reor, qui aliquid in medium, quaecumque illud sit, afferant, quod quota ex parte nos delectet)’: see Leon Battista Alberti, *Intercenali inedite*, p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Hi fuere auctores, qui quidem ad manus nostras pervenere: Graeci Xenophon, Absyrtus, Chiron, Hippocrates et Pelagonius; Latini Cato, Varro, Virgilius, Plinius, Columella, Vegetius, Palladius, Calaber, Crescentius, Albertus, Abbas; Gallici praeterea, et Etrusci complurimi, ignobiles quidem, verum utiles atque experti. Quin et ex optimis medicorum ea deduxi, quae quidem ad rem ipsam facere viderentur’: see Leo Baptista Alberti, *De equo animante*, edizione bilingue a cura di Antonio Videtta, con una presentazione di Charles B. Schmitt (Naples, 1991), pp. 92–4.

‘learnedly and elegantly (*docte et eleganter*)’ on the subject of horses’ illnesses.<sup>52</sup> Petrarch would never have dealt with this subject let alone quote positively from medical authors or praise scholastic writers for having written elegantly. Even at the end of *De re aedificatoria*, he claims that the ideal architect should imitate the practice of literary scholars who do not count themselves proficient ‘unless they have read and become familiar with all authors even those who are not good but who have at least written something on the discipline they profess’.<sup>53</sup> From the outset of his career to the end, Alberti appreciated the contribution of all writers, technical and scientific as well as purely literary. All of this is in stark contrast to Petrarch who felt that even his lowest Latin prose style was far above anything that could be written either by members of the Papal Curia or by lawyers (*Familiares* 13. 5; 14.2).

The ‘*laus oratoris*’ passage in the *Brutus* also has an abiding significance for Alberti. There Cicero is describing the rhetorical qualities of Licinius Crassus, saying that he possessed ‘the maximum gravitas, but this was coupled with a rhetorical not vulgar sense of humour, full of wit and urbanity, as well as an accurate elegance in his use of Latin, and a wonderful way of explaining matters’ (*Erat summa gravitas, erat cum gravitate iunctus facetiarum et urbanitatis oratorius, non scurrilis lepos, Latine loquendi accurate et sine molestia diligens elegantia, in disserendo mira explicatio*, *Brutus* 143). This passage chimes with other lengthy sequences in Cicero on the crucial importance of humour and wit in oratory (*Orator* 87–90; *De oratore* 2. 216–90), passages whose significance was first appreciated by Alberti almost a century before Castiglione seized on their importance for the courtier. So the cult of a humorous strain in his Latin works stems as much from this Ciceronian approval of wit as from the dialogues of Lucian. The annotations ‘*laus amicitie*’ and ‘*laus oratoris*’ may seem obvious but they point to two key elements of Battista’s poetics: a communicative style, and the importance of humour.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Institueram et de cura aegrotantium equorum aliquid conscribere, sed cum tam multos auctores, tamque optimos: Absyrntum, Chironem, Pelagonium, Catonem, Columellam, Vegetium; tum et novissimos bonos utilesque hac in re scriptores: Palladium, Calabrum, Albertum, Ruffum, Crescentium, Abbatem et eiusmodi, docte et eleganter scripsisse animadverterem, decrevi non meas esse partes in ea re operas perdere, quandoquidem neque aliter scribere atque a veteribus scriptum est, servata dignitate, neque ita scribere uti a veteribus scriptum est, furti calumnia evitata, posse me intelligam’ (Alberti, *De equo animante*, cit., pp. 166–70).

<sup>53</sup> ‘Nemo enim se satis dedisse operam litteris putabit, ni auctores omnes etiam non bonos legerit atque cognorit, qui quidem in ea facultate aliquid scripserit, quam sectentur’ (*De re aedificatoria*, IX, 10; pp. 855–7).



Alberti may not have been concerned with the philological restoration of texts, but he was practically concerned with measuring other physical remains of the ancient world, and this highlights another crucial difference with Petrarch. The latter's famous 1337 letter to Giovanni Colonna describing the ruins of Rome is cited by historians as a passage that is prophetic of Gibbon's aesthetic appreciation of the ruins of Rome, and also as the moment when the continuum of history from antiquity to the middle ages is first interrupted and the difference between ancient and medieval history is first posited, as Petrarch tells his correspondent that the ruins of the city inspired their discussions on Roman history: 'And as we wandered round the broken walls of the city or sat there, the fragments of the ruins were before our eyes. What happened? We would talk a lot about history, which we seemed to divide up in this way: you seemed better in recent, and I in ancient history, and by ancient I mean whatever preceded the celebration and veneration of Christ's name by the Roman Emperor, and by modern everything from then to our own times' (*Familiars* 6.2.15–16). It is for passages such as this that historians claim that 'the Renaissance sense of history begins with Petrarch'.<sup>54</sup> Alberti too became deeply familiar with the ruins of Rome, but his reaction was not to meditate on the course of history but more practically to measure the ruins and then record them in such a way that scholars could produce from his *Descriptio urbis Rome* (1446–7) a map of the ancient city's walls, temples and gates. Apart from this short work, his measurement of the ancient buildings also led to the composition of his major technical treatise on architecture, *De re aedificatoria* (c.1452), transmitting their proportions in his treatises so they could become models for contemporary architects. Alberti, like all humanists, was interested in the recovery and analysis of ancient remains, textual or otherwise, but he consistently transmitted his findings also to those who were outside the close circle of humanist philologists.

### Assimilation, imitation and originality

The third major feature of humanism we mentioned was the assimilation of classical ideas and values, which is clearly in evidence in all Alberti's works, perhaps most obviously in the ethical vernacular dialogues which

<sup>54</sup> See Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London, 1969), p. 20.

brought classical—especially Stoic—ideas, to a new public. The other obvious area to exhibit classical ideals was in the major question of literary imitation and originality. The attitude of both Petrarch and Alberti to this key process is broadly similar. Petrarch discussed *imitatio* in three major letters (*Familiares* 1.8; 22.2; 23.19). In all of them he recognised the need to imitate classical authors and genres, but he forbade pedestrian and especially verbatim imitation of an ancient model, insisting always that the modern writer produce something distinctively his own, different yet unified, even though based on a number of sources: ‘*similitudo*’ not ‘*identitas*’, as he put it (*Familiares* 22.2). Closely connected with the idea of *imitatio* is the question of originality. Petrarch’s notion of the distinctive element that each writer must preserve even while imitating classical models implies that the writer must retain some originality as well. The clearest articulation of this question in Petrarch is in his late letter to Boccaccio (*Seniles* 5.2, c.1364), where he states that since ancient writers had set matchless standards in their writing of both Latin prose and verse, there was nothing left for the modern writer to do in order to be original except to write in the new vernacular. This was one of the motives that had inspired the poet to write a major work in the *volgare* (probably the *Trionfi*);<sup>55</sup> but he abandoned the project when he realised how his vernacular works would be subject to distortion in the mouths of the ignorant public. The letter then goes on to denounce the age in which he lives as hopelessly inferior to antiquity in every respect, from literary culture to military and political matters: Petrarch’s attack on the present age finds many parallels in his work, but it is only in this late text that he saw resorting to the vernacular as a way out of the impasse of writing something original when classical writers had said everything, and even then he does so only to dismiss the idea, stating that he then went back to writing in Latin.

In Alberti, however, the motif of originality is sounded time and time again, usually with a very different perspective on the modern age. It is first heard in his early treatise *De commodis* (c.1430). In the introduction, the young author complains that he cannot think of writing anything that

<sup>55</sup> See Francesco Petrarca, *Senile V 2*, ed. Monica Berté (Florence, 1998), p. 79: ‘totum huic vulgari studio tempus dare, quod uterque stilus altior latinus eo usque priscis ingeniis cultus esset ut pene iam nichil nostra ope vel cuiuslibet addi posset, at hic, modo inventus, adhuc recens, vastatoribus crebris ac raro squalidus colono, magni se vel ornamenti capacem ostenderet vel augmenti. Quid vis? Hac spe tractus simulque stimulis actus adolescentie magnum eo in genere opus incepteram [. . .].’ For the various interpretations of which ‘magnum opus’ Petrarch is referring to, see *ibid.*, p. 17.

has not already been covered by classical authors, both in serious and comic genres, so posterity is left only with the option of reading and admiring the ancient writers.<sup>56</sup> His older humanist contemporaries had already seized the few areas not dealt with in classical texts, and had written historical works and dealt with the behaviour of princes:<sup>57</sup> Alberti was probably thinking here of Petrarch's and Bruni's historical works as well as the former's letter-treatise on the ideal prince written in 1373 (*Seniles* 14.1). So he and other young writers could only try to compose something new and original (*Nos vero iuniores modo aliquid novi proferamus*), without concern for the harsh criticism of those humanists who only want 'passively to learn and not to write'.<sup>58</sup> This pursuit of originality at all costs recurs throughout many other works such as *De pictura* (at strategic points in both the Latin and vernacular versions),<sup>59</sup> the *De equo animante*,<sup>60</sup> in *Profugiorum ab erumna libri*,<sup>61</sup> and in *Momus*.<sup>62</sup> It is worth returning to

<sup>56</sup> *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, ed. Laura Goggi Carotti (Florence, 1976), p. 39: 'Ita et seria omnia et iocosa veteres ipsi complexi sunt. Nobis tantum legendi atque admirandi sui facultatem et necessitatem dimiserunt.'

<sup>57</sup> *De commodis*, p. 41: 'Condant illi quidem historiam, tractent mores principum ac gesta rerum publicarum eventusque bellorum.'

<sup>58</sup> *De commodis*, p. 41: 'Nos vero iuniores modo aliquid novi proferamus, non vereamur severissima [. . .] iudicia illorum, qui cum ipsi infantes et elingues sint, tantum aures ad cognoscendum nimium delitiosas porrigunt.' Alberti probably had in mind humanists such as Niccolò Niccoli, who had the finest humanist library of the time but notoriously never wrote anything.

<sup>59</sup> The Latin dedication to Giovan Francesco Gonzaga mentions the work's originality ('rei novitate') as making it suitable for princely ears (*OV*, III, 9). But the work's novelty is insisted on at strategic points throughout, at the beginning and end of book I: 'in questa certo difficile e da niuno altro che io sappi descritta materia'; 'in hac plane difficile et a nemine quod viderim alio tradita litteris materia' (III, 10–11); 'novità della materia'; 'ob materiae novitatem' (III, 40–1); at the beginning and end of book II: 'poi che non come Plinio recitiamo storie, ma di nuovo fabbrichiamo un'arte di pittura, della quale in questa età, quale io vegga, nulla si truova scritto'; 'quando quidem non historiam picturae ut Plinius, sed artem novissime recenseamus, de qua hac aetate nulla scriptorium veterum monumenta quae ipse viderim extant' (III, 46–7); 'Noi vero, i quali, se mai da altri fu scritta, abbiamo cavato questa arte di sotterra, o se non mai fu scritta, l'abbiamo tratta di cielo'; 'Nos autem qui hanc picturae artem seu ab aliis olim descriptam ab inferis repetitam in lucem restituimus, sive numquam a quoquam tractatam a superis deduximus' (III, 86–7); and at the end of book III: 'Noi però ci reputeremo a voluttà primi aver presa questa palma d'aver ardito commendare alle lettere questa arte sottilissima e nobilissima'; 'Nos tamen hanc palmam praeripuisse ad voluptatem ducimus, quandoquidem primi fuerimus qui hanc artem subtilissimam litteris mandaverimus' (III, 106–7).

<sup>60</sup> 'It seemed appropriate at this point to expound some advice which is very apt and useful for the care of horses and which has never been written down by the ancients themselves (Nonnullas tamen commonefactiones, quae sint ad equorum curam accomodatae atque utilissimae, ab ipsis veteribus non perscriptas hoc loco exposuisse condecet)': Alberti, *De equo animante*, p. 170.

<sup>61</sup> *OV*, II, 161.

<sup>62</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *Momus*, trans. Sarah Knight, Latin text ed. Virginia Brown, Sarah Knight (Cambridge, MA, 2003), pp. 2–4.

one well-known passage in order to highlight crucial differences between Alberti's humanism and Petrarch's.

The famous prologue to the vernacular version of *Della pittura*, dedicated to Filippo Brunelleschi, architect of the recently built dome of Florence Cathedral, begins with a humanist lament on the decline of those arts and sciences that had been cultivated in antiquity.<sup>63</sup> This opening sequence could have been penned by Petrarch himself:

I used both to marvel and regret that so many excellent and divine arts and sciences, which we know from their works and from historical accounts were possessed in great abundance by the talented men of antiquity, have now disappeared and are almost entirely lost. Painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, geometers, rhetoricians, augurs and suchlike distinguished and remarkable intellects, are very rarely to be found these days, and are of little merit. Consequently I believed what I heard many say that Nature, mistress of all things, had grown old and weary, and was no longer producing intellects any more than giants on a vast and wonderful scale such as she did in what one might call her youthful and glorious days.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed Alberti's use of the topos of the world grown old, which derived ultimately from either Columella (*De re rustica*, 1 Pref. 2) or the younger Pliny (*Epistles* 6. 21), may suggest he had Petrarch himself in mind since in his *Invective Against a Physician* (1355) the earlier humanist had denounced the contemporary age as having almost no men of genius ('*raros ingeniosos*') compared with antiquity, and this may have been caused by the fact that 'the world has grown old and totters towards its end; sluggish and cold, like an aging person, it slows in its activity'.<sup>65</sup>

The opening of Alberti's dedicatory letter to Brunelleschi is also typically humanist in another way, in that once more it shows how Battista exploited the classical texts he read when he came to write. I have argued elsewhere that the strange presence of augurs in this list of great arts in decline was not due either to the fact that augury was considered a liberal art like rhetoric, or because architects and engineers were modern versions of augurs, who in their role as military advisers had to use astrology to work out when was the best time to attack the enemy.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> On the idea that the dedicatory letter was written to coincide with the inauguration of the new dome on 17 July 1436, see Lucia Bertolini, 'Nouvelles perspectives sur le *De pictura* et sa réception', in Françoise Choay, Michel Paoli (eds.), *Alberti, humaniste, architecte* (Paris, 2006), pp. 33–45 (34).

<sup>64</sup> Alberti, *OV*, III, 7; Alberti, *On Painting*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>65</sup> Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, cit., p. 59.

<sup>66</sup> See Martin McLaughlin, 'Alberti e le opere retoriche di Cicerone', cit., pp. 199–200. Amongst earlier interpretations, Christine Smith argued that the augurs were included along with the

Instead their presence seems to stem from Alberti's deep reading of key Ciceronian texts we know he possessed such as the *Brutus*, the *De amicitia* and the *De senectute*. For a start the fact that augurs are mentioned in this list immediately after rhetoricians suggests a link between the two categories, and this is confirmed by many texts. Cicero's *Brutus* itself begins with the death of Hortensius, the great augur and orator, 'I grieved that the standing of our college [of augurs] had been diminished by the death of such an augur'; and throughout the rest of the dialogue there are several other mentions of great rhetoricians who had been augurs as well, so the link between the augurs' college and rhetoric is well established in this text alone.<sup>67</sup> The opening words of *De amicitia* give similar prominence to an augur: 'Q. Mucius the augur used to tell many memorable and pleasant anecdotes about his father-in-law C. Laelius' (*De amicitia*, 1.1), while in the *De senectute* Cato the Elder praises the rhetorical skills in the augur Q. Fabius Maximus' funeral oration for his son (*De senectute* 12). Here it is worth adding that in the final Cicero text that we know Alberti possessed, the *De legibus*, there is further discussion of augurs. In book 2 Cicero points out that the augurs' capacity to foretell the future was no longer their prime function since already in his time this art had clearly declined through old age and neglect ('et vetustate et neglegentia', *De legibus*, 2. 33). So Alberti's lament for the death of augury in its literal sense of divining was nothing new; but in these fundamental texts, for all of which Alberti possessed his own copy,<sup>68</sup> augurs are consistently linked with orators and lawyers as well with state religion; the augurs' college produced some of the best orators of ancient Rome, Cicero and Hortensius among them, and it is for their link with rhetoricians rather

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musicians, geometers, and rhetoricians as 'representatives of the liberal arts': see Christine Smith, 'Originality and cultural progress in the Quattrocento: Brunelleschi's dome and a letter by Alberti', *Rinascimento*, 28 (1988), 291–318 (here 292–3); and Grafton claimed that 'engineers, in short, were augurs as well as mathematicians and artists' (*Leon Battista Alberti. Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance*, p. 80).

<sup>67</sup> Mentions of other augurs are in *Brutus* 101 (C. Fannius), 102 (Mucius), 117 (Tubero), 212 (Scaevola, an expert in law), 267 (Appius Claudius, also expert in law).

<sup>68</sup> For his MS containing *De senectute*, *De amicitia*, and *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, Marciana Lat. VI. 205 (386), see Francesca Mazzanti, 'Scheda 61', in *Leon Battista Alberti. La biblioteca di un umanista*, cit., pp. 402–3; for the MS of *De legibus*, Florence Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Conv. Soppres. I. 9. 3, see Maria Luisa Tanganelli, 'Scheda 60', *Leon Battista Alberti. La biblioteca di un umanista*, cit., p. 396. See also the wide-ranging article by Cardini, which picks up other echoes of the Cicero text in Alberti: Roberto Cardini, 'Biografia, leggi, e astrologia in un nuovo reperto albertiano', in *Leon Battista Alberti umanista e scrittore. Filologia, esegesi, tradizione*, pp. 21–189 (esp. pp. 28–100).

than their capacity to predict the future that Alberti includes them in this famous list.

Returning to the prologue, if its opening gambit shows Alberti the humanist repeating a Petrarchan lament for the past, and recycling concepts from his reading of Cicero, in what he says next he differs totally from Petrarch: his first contact with Florence after the family's exile makes him realise that the arts practised by Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, Masaccio and Luca della Robbia are such that these men 'are in no way inferior to any of the ancients'. In fact, he states that this superiority is as much due to such men's industry and diligence as to Nature or the age they live in, and concludes this section by proclaiming the artistic superiority of the present age over antiquity: since in the past there were plenty of models for the ancients to learn from, therefore 'it follows that our fame should be all the greater if without preceptors and without any model to imitate we discover arts and sciences hitherto unheard of and unseen'.<sup>69</sup> Alberti is interested in the arts *and* sciences, as he says here, and for him Brunelleschi's dome even outdoes the achievements of ancient architecture, a concept unthinkable in Petrarch and other humanists. And that this sense of modern superiority is not simply a rhetorical topos appropriate to introductory letters or prologues is confirmed by the fact that in the treatise itself he states that ancient painting and sculpture show no grasp of perspective (*OV*, III, 40–1), while throughout the *De re aedificatoria* Vitruvius is regularly criticised.<sup>70</sup>

### The literary public

One of the major consequences of their different attitudes to Latin and the vernacular was that Petrarch and Alberti held highly differing views on the literary public that the intellectual should be writing for. It is well known that Petrarch despised what he called the 'vulgus', and felt that the serious writer should only be writing for an intellectual elite, the small minority that could read Latin. Both in his late letter to Boccaccio

<sup>69</sup> Alberti, *OV*, III, 7; Alberti, *On Painting*, pp. 34–5.

<sup>70</sup> At the end of Book 9 Alberti rejects the idea expressed at the beginning of Vitruvius that the architect must have studied all other disciplines: literature, draughtsmanship, geometry, history, philosophy, music, medicine, jurisprudence, and astrology (Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 1.1.3); instead, for Alberti, the architect must only know those subjects that are linked in some way with architecture, for example painting and mathematics, but not law, astronomy, music and rhetoric (*IX*, 10; p. 861).

(*Seniles* 5.2) and in his Letter to Posterity he proclaimed that he only wrote vernacular trifles in his youth, but changed to serious works in Latin once he reached maturity. However, it is also well documented that despite many official pronouncements to this effect, the great humanist continued to revise his vernacular poetry, both the lyric poems of the *Canzoniere* and the epic vision-poem, the *Trionfi*, to within months of his death at the age of 70.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, what influenced his disciples was not the reality of his revising his vernacular poems until very late on in life, but rather his official pronouncements on the subject. So powerful was Petrarch's message about the inferior status of the *volgare* that his example rerouted the path of the Italian vernacular for about a century: after Petrarch's death in 1374 serious vernacular poetry went underground as Italian writers opted to perfect Latin not the *volgare*, and it was only in the 1470s, in the age of Lorenzo de' Medici, that vernacular poetry starts to revive. One passage in particular is representative of all such statements. In a letter to the friend whom he called Socrates, Petrarch states categorically:

I prefer to be understood and appreciated by the few rather than be understood by everyone and appreciated by nobody. For the learned are always few in number and in our day very few. [. . .] As long therefore as they remain few in number I do not mind being judged by them; but the judgment of the many, that is of the ordinary people ('*vulgus*'), has always been of such little importance to me that I prefer not to be understood by them than to be praised by them.<sup>72</sup>

By contrast, Alberti composed many works in the vernacular, and the early part of his life saw him mount a series of campaigns on behalf of the new language. Not only did he write the first serious moral dialogues in the *volgare*, but he also inaugurated, as we saw, a series of other genres in the language. In addition to this practical demonstration of his cult of the vernacular, he wrote a Grammar of Tuscan, to show that it was every bit as 'regular' a language as Latin, and in the wake of the famous humanist language debate of 1435, he argued correctly that the language spoken in antiquity was just one language, Latin, and that the vernacular did not exist in Roman times but came into existence only after the barbarian invasions. It was thanks to his reading of Cicero's *Brutus* that he was able to see that Latin too had once been a new language, it had a

<sup>71</sup> Francesco Petrarca, *Trionfi, Rime estravaganti, Codice degli abbozzi*, ed. Vinicio Pacca, Laura Paolino (Milan, 1996), p. 889.

<sup>72</sup> *Familiars*, 14.2.6–7. Petrarch's 'Socrates' was Ludwig van Kempen, a Flemish chanter whom he met in Avignon.

diachronic development, and only reached its peak in the time of Cicero and Virgil thanks to the fact that so many writers wrote in the language. In the same way, he argued, the new Tuscan language would only be able to acquire the dignity of Latin if intellectuals are willing to write in it. This is the point he makes in the Proem to the third book of *De familia*, probably written around 1437, in words that seem to echo and rebut Petrarch's position in *Familiare* 14.2:

But perhaps the prudent will rather praise me if I, by writing in such a way as to be understood by everyone, aim first at benefiting the many instead of pleasing the few, for you know how few are those who know Latin these days. [. . .] And if I do not shy away from being both understood and judged by all our citizens, then let those who blame me either put aside their envy or find some more useful subject matter in which to show how eloquent they are.<sup>73</sup>

This view of the literary public and the promotion of the new language are unthinkable in Petrarch. Battista's campaign on behalf of the vernacular continued a few years later, in 1441, when he organised the Certame Coronario, or Crown Contest, a literary competition for a vernacular poem on 'amicitia', sponsored by Piero de' Medici, with major humanists such as Leonardo Bruni on the jury. Both the original idea and Alberti's protest when the humanist judges failed to award the prize stemmed from his understanding of the development of Latin literature, an understanding acquired through a reading of Quintilian and Cicero's *Brutus*.<sup>74</sup>

No doubt Alberti's more practical pursuits also made him appreciate, in a way that Petrarch could never do, those who were not intellectuals. This emerges particularly in their attitudes to art. Petrarch famously claimed in his will that the beauty of Giotto's painting of the Virgin, which he possessed, was a source of amazement to the experts but could not be appreciated by the ignorant.<sup>75</sup> On this subject Alberti's views were completely opposed: he believed that it was precisely in painting, and the

<sup>73</sup> 'Più tosto forse e' prudenti mi loderanno s'io, scrivendo in modo che ciascuno m'intenda, prima cerco giovare a molti che piacere a pochi, ché sai quanto siano pochissimi a questi dí e' literati. [. . .] E se io non fuggo essere come inteso così giudicato da tutti e' nostri cittadini, piaccia quando che sia a chi mi biasima o deponer l'invidia, o pigliar più utile materia in qual sé demonstrino eloquenti' (Alberti, *De familia*, III, Proemio, *OV*, I, 155–6).

<sup>74</sup> For the echoes of Quintilian, see McLaughlin, 'Alberti e le opere retoriche di Cicerone', cit., pp. 191–2.

<sup>75</sup> '[T]abulam meam sive iconam beate Virginis Marie, operam Iotti pictoris egregii, [. . .] cuius pulchritudinem ignorantes non intelligunt, magistri autem artis stupent' ('my panel or icon of the blessed Virgin Mary, a work of the eminent painter Giotto [. . .]. The ignorant do not understand the beauty of this panel but the masters of the art are stunned by it'). See *Petrarch's Testament*, ed. and trans. Theodore E. Mommsen (Ithaca, NY, 1957), pp. 78–81.



fine arts in general, that the views of the masses and those of intellectuals coincided, another idea gleaned from a major passage in Cicero's *Brutus* (183–200) which had made the same point about oratory, and it is reiterated on several occasions in the treatise on painting (three times in book 2. 28).

All this suggests that the paragraph in his autobiography about meeting and questioning artisans, despite it being partly a literary topos modelled on Socrates' behaviour, also reflects what Alberti believed:

He would enquire of artisans, architects, ship-builders and even from shoemakers and tailors, whether there was perhaps some technique in their craft which was unusual and *recherché* and which they carefully preserved as something peculiar to their art [ . . .].<sup>76</sup>

Such a statement is impossible in Petrarch. Indeed it seems that the categories specified here—artisans, architects, ship-builders, shoemakers and tailors—are precisely those attacked by his great predecessor in his late letters and invectives, as well as by other humanists of Alberti's generation.<sup>77</sup> In book 2 of *De familia* he even lists as the first examples of those who work with their intellect architects, shipbuilders and doctors ('argonauta, architetto, medico e simili, da' quali in prima si richiede giudicio e opera d'animo', *OV*, I, 145), occupations that would never have been so classified by Petrarch. This was all part of Alberti's wider revolution of status which elevated painting, sculpture and architecture from mechanical to liberal arts.<sup>78</sup> In the general humanist context of contempt for manual work, Battista's open esteem for artisans, cobblers and tailors seems to acquire a new significance. Clearly he is going against the humanist grain in showing interest in these tradesmen's arts, and yet there are classical justifications for such a stance. Just as his defence of the *volgare* was carried out in humanist terms, by writing a grammar of the language, as Priscian had done for the Latin language, and also by organising the 1441 literary competition, as had happened in antiquity to promote Latin literature, so here his positive appreciation of shoemakers once more stems also from his reading of ancient texts.

<sup>76</sup> Fubini and Menci-Gallorini, 'L'autobiografia', p. 72.

<sup>77</sup> Martin McLaughlin, 'Literature and Science in Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*', in P. Antonello and S. Gilson (eds.), *Literature and Science in Italian Culture from Dante to Calvino. A Festschrift for Patrick Boyde* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 94–114 (esp. pp. 104–5).

<sup>78</sup> See Jean-Marc Mandosio, 'La classification des sciences et des arts chez Alberti', *Leon Battista Alberti: Actes du congrès international de Paris (10–15 avril 1995)*, ed. Francesco Furlan et al., II, 643–704.

There were two specific classical traditions associated with cobblers. The first of these is the well-known anecdote about the Greek painter Apelles who was fond of hiding behind his paintings to hear any criticisms made by the people. One painting was criticised by a passing cobbler, because on the subject's sandals Apelles had painted one loop fewer than there should be (Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.85); Apelles immediately altered the sandal, but the next day the same cobbler was so pleased to see that the great painter had adjusted this fault in the light of his criticism, that he began to criticise the leg in the painting: it was at that point that Apelles leapt out from behind the painting to warn the cobbler to stick to criticising sandals. Now this anecdote clearly has two stages, one in which the shoemaker's views triumph as they are taken into account by the artist; but in the sequel, when the cobbler criticises things outside his expertise, his opinion is rejected, giving rise to the proverb, 'Cobbler, stick to thy last.' Both Petrarch and Alberti cite the anecdote, but the difference is that Petrarch, in his *Invective against a Physician*, predictably dwells on the second episode, when he urges his opponent to stick to medicine and remember what Apelles said to the cobbler who was stepping outside his area of expertise.<sup>79</sup> Alberti, on the other hand, cites approvingly only the first part of the anecdote in his final piece of advice at the end of *Della pittura*, urging the painter to listen to criticism from friends, chance spectators and the public in general.<sup>80</sup>

The other ancient discipline that enhanced the status of shoemakers was philosophy. Plato wrote many philosophical dialogues where Socrates pretends to be ignorant and asks craftsmen about their skills, as well as using analogies from the practices of artisans in his arguments. That Alberti was aware of this Socratic tradition is confirmed by the fact that the final sentences of this paragraph from his autobiography, which are not quoted by Burckhardt, show a clear attempt by the author to portray himself as a second Socrates: 'and he immediately communicated these same things [artisans' skills] to his eager fellow citizens. He pretended he was ignorant in many matters so that he could question the genius, character and expertise of other people' (*Vita*, p. 72). This portrayal of a

<sup>79</sup> 'Prosequere igitur ludum tuum; ita, tamen, ut deinceps ethicam non molestes, sed memineris quid sutori terminos suos excedenti respondit pictorum famosissimus Apelles' (in Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, cit., p. 126).

<sup>80</sup> See Alberti, *On Painting* (III, 62), cit., p. 95; (*OV*, III, 104–6). On Alberti's openness to collaboration with others in all his works, see Anthony Grafton, 'Un passe-partout ai segreti di una vita: Alberti e la scrittura cifrata', in *La vita e il mondo di Leon Battista Alberti*, cit., I, 3–21 (13–15).

Socratic philosopher amongst craftsmen also derived from the *Lives of the Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius' series of biographies of the great philosophers (one of which was actually the life of a philosophical cobbler, *The Life of Simon*). That Alberti knew these two classical traditions regarding shoemakers, the Apellean and the Socratic, is clear from the many references to Apelles in his aesthetic treatises, and in the allusions to Socrates conversing with shoemakers in *Momus*.<sup>81</sup>

In the century that elapsed between Petrarch's world and Alberti's many things had changed under the sun, even inside the humanist movement itself. One of these major shifts was the knowledge of Greek. Battista goes to meet artisans not just because he has a more open outlook, but also because the ancient texts he read, both Greek and Latin, taught him the value of listening to the opinions of such men. He portrays himself, then, not only as someone who is inquisitive about other arts, from architecture to shoemaking, but also as someone who is steeped in classical lore about the model artist and model philosopher.

### *Quid tum?*

One final demonstration of the importance of studying the texts Alberti himself read relates to one of the most enduring enigmas surrounding him: the meaning of his emblem, the winged eye, and its motto '*Quid tum?*' The image of the eye with wings appears on its own next to Alberti's head in the so-called self-portrait, the bronze plaquette in Washington, dating from around 1435 (Fig. 1). The eye is found encircled by a laurel wreath, possibly in the author's own hand, on an MS containing *De pictura* in the vernacular (BNC, Florence, II. IV. 38, f.119v), as well as on the reverse of the medal containing the portrait of Alberti by Matteo de' Pasti, dated to 1453–5 (Figs. 2 and 3).<sup>82</sup> There have been many suggestions regarding the meaning of the emblem and its motto. Edgar Wind suggested that the eye expressed the *terribilità* of the divine eye, and that the combination of eye and wings hinted at a common point of reference in the eagle, which famously could stare directly into the sun. For Wind, the emblem thus signified 'the union of supreme insight and supreme

<sup>81</sup> Alberti, *Momus*, cit., pp. 252–4.

<sup>82</sup> For illustrations of these items see Alberto G. Cassani, '*Explicanda sunt mysteria: l'enigma albertiano dell'occhio alato*', in *Leon Battista Alberti: Actes du Congrès International de Paris*, I, 245–304 (256–7).



**Figure 1.** Alberti, *Self-portrait*, c.1435, bronze, 201 × 136 mm; Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

power’, evoking the ubiquity of the omniscient God.<sup>83</sup> As for ‘*Quid tum?*’, even though Cicero simply used the phrase as an expression of rhetorical suspense, Wind interpreted the motto as having a fearful, eschatological meaning, since the phrase referred, he thought, to the approach of the

<sup>83</sup> Edgar Wind, ‘The Concealed God’, in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (rev. edn.; Harmondsworth, 1967), pp. 218–35 (232).



Figure 2. Matteo de' Pasti, *Medal of Leo Baptista Albertus*, obverse, c.1453–5, bronze; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Méd. ital. 580.



Figure 3. Matteo de' Pasti, *Medal of Leo Baptista Albertus*, reverse, c.1453–5, bronze; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Méd. ital. 580.

God and thus ‘the classical phrase of expectation expands into a threatening sense of the *Dies Irae*’ (p. 233).

A full survey of interpretations was recently provided by Alberto Cassani. Cassani sees the eye here as symbolising both the human and the divine eye, and notes the author’s penchant for riddles, brief enigmatic sayings and hidden codes (including the *De componendis cyfris*); in fact in the architecture treatise Alberti states that the eye in Egyptian hieroglyphs symbolised the deity (*De re* VIII. 4, p. 697). As for the motto, ‘*Quid tum?*’, Cassani suggests that this simple question, exemplifying Alberti’s favourite device of *brevitas* but still full of mystery, might stand for the ultimate question, ‘What then does it mean to live?’ Indeed the fact that the phrase was also much used by Plautus and Terence suggests that the question can be ironic or ridiculous as well as serious. David Marsh has shown that Alberti had read and imitated Lucian’s dialogues in several of the *Intercenales*;<sup>84</sup> and Cassani, like Marsh, does not exclude a Lucianic source either, since in Lucian’s *Icaromenippus* the protagonist Menippus cuts off the right wing of an eagle and the left wing of a vulture for his flight up to heaven, thus becoming Icaromenippus.<sup>85</sup> From there he looks down on the cosmos, flapping the eagle’s wing in order to sharpen his eyesight to see the earth. At a certain point Menippus says, ‘What is it then?’—a Greek phrase equivalent to ‘*Quid tum?*’—enquiring about the link between a wing and an eye, and he is told that the link is the eagle which can gaze into the sun. Thus the eye and the wing give ‘regal’, almost ‘divine’ sight to Menippus, and Cassani concludes ‘L’emblema di Battista sembra trovare in questo passo di Luciano la sua fonte letteraria più evidente.’<sup>86</sup>

However, restricting ourselves to a consideration of the verbal motto, the link posited by Wind between Cicero’s phrase ‘*Quid tum?*’ and eschatology is quite tenuous and it is possible that another more relevant interpretation might come, once more, from examining the classical context in which the rhetorical interjection is originally used. It is much used by Plautus and Terence, as Cassani showed, and it may well be that Alberti simply derived it from these favourite comic texts of his to suggest an ironic ‘What does it matter?’ approach.<sup>87</sup> However, another more obvious

<sup>84</sup> David Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins. Humor and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998), pp. 83–92.

<sup>85</sup> Cassani, ‘*Explicanda sunt mysteria*’, p. 275.

<sup>86</sup> Cassani, ‘*Explicanda sunt mysteria*’, pp. 276–7.

<sup>87</sup> See, for instance, Plautus, *Asinaria*, 335, 346, 350; *Curculio*, 726; *Poenulus*, 730; Terence, *Heautontimoroumenos*, 602, 605, 718, 801, 847; *Eunuchus*, 339, 370, 604, 637, 793 etc.; though

source that we know Alberti read might once more offer a clue, namely Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. Recent studies by Lucia Bertolini and others have shown how Alberti drew on this dialogue on several occasions in his works.<sup>88</sup> Now in the *Tusculans* 'Quid tum?' occurs just twice. On the first occasion, the phrase seems a genuine question: when the unnamed protagonist asks 'Do you see that I have plenty of leisure?' the interlocutor replies 'And so? (*Quid tum?*)?'; at which the protagonist explains that in his leisure he translated many Greek poets for use in his speeches (*Tusculans*, 2. 26).

But it is the second occurrence of the phrase which may offer us a more relevant clue to its significance for Alberti. Towards the end of the last book the protagonist is discussing the self-sufficiency of virtue, a theme close to Battista's heart. Talking of the fickleness of popular acclaim, he says it is natural for many peoples to hate those with superior virtue, hence Aristides was actually banished for being too just (*Tusculans*, 5. 105), and this example leads into a discussion of exile and how the wise man can rise above it, especially as in exile he can have the leisure to read and write literature. The principal speaker observes that although exile is considered the greatest evil because it separates us from our country (5. 106), yet the various provinces are full of men in exile who never return home. At this point the interlocutor objects: 'But exiles are deprived of their possessions (*"At multantur bonis exules"*),' and that is when the protagonist replies "*Quid tum?"*" (So what?), and he goes on: 'Have we not said a lot already about how to put up with poverty? In fact if we inquire into the real nature of exile, not the ignominy of its name, how different is it in the end from perpetual wandering? The noblest philosophers have lived like this' (5.107). Here he names men such as Aristotle, Chrysippus and others (many of whom are cited in Alberti's works). Thus exile is not incompatible with the virtuous life. The importance of this passage cannot be overestimated, dealing as it does with exile, one of the major factors that conditioned Battista's life. And although Alberti returned to his native city once the exile ban was lifted, the condition of the intellectual exile continues to

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Gorni derives it from Virgil's *Eclogues* 10.38–9: 'Quid tum si fuscus Amyntas? | Et nigrae violae sunt et vaccinia nigra': Guglielmo Gorni, 'Storia del Certame Coronario', *Rinascimento*, 12 (1972), 135–81 (139–40, n. 2).

<sup>88</sup> See Lucia Bertolini, *Grecus sapor. Tramiti di presenze greche in Leon Battista Alberti* (Rome, 1998), p. 107, for a list of passages; the *Profugiorum ab erumna libri* were also inspired by Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, according to Luca Boschetto, *Leon Battista Alberti e Firenze*, p. 139. See now also Roberto Cardini, *Ortografia e consolazione in un corpus allestito da L. B. Alberti. Il codice Moreni 2 della Biblioteca Moreniana de Firenze* (Florence, 2008), pp. LXVII–LXVIII.

haunt the autobiographical characters also of later works such as *Theogenius* (c.1440) and *Profugiorum* (1441–2). The phrase ‘*Quid tum?*’ signals the moment in Cicero’s discussion when the wise man copes with the worst evil that can befall him, banishment and loss of belongings, so the phrase is a shorthand cipher for Alberti’s Stoic capacity to rise above his earthly problems.

Remarkably the section immediately following this passage in Cicero deals with the eyes. The discussion considers the question whether the man without sight can be happy: the protagonist argues that unlike the other senses, pleasure does not reside in the eye itself, as it does with taste, smell and touch, but in what the soul perceives through sight: ‘It is the soul which receives the objects we see. [. . .] And the thought of the wise man rarely calls on the eyes for his investigations.’ (*Tusculans*, 5. 111). The fact is that the soul can experience pleasure in many ways without the use of sight (we remember that the soul was often symbolised by wings, from Plato’s *Phaedrus* onwards, a work Alberti knew well), for the wise man life involves thinking, and he does not need his physical eyes to carry out investigations. In this one section, then, at the conclusion of a major Ciceronian dialogue, and one we know Alberti read, we find the phrase ‘*Quid tum?*’ signalling a rising above the misfortune of exile and leading into a discussion about the superiority of mental insight over physical eyesight. Here, surely, we find at least another likely source and interpretation of Alberti’s enigmatic emblem of the winged eye and its motto.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

And so (*Quid tum?*)? One point that emerges from all this is that although Alberti is steeped in ancient texts every bit as much as Petrarch, he inaugurates a real change in the direction of humanism. We see him beginning with traditional humanist genres such as a Latin comedy, a treatise/invec-

<sup>89</sup> Luca Boschetto, ‘Tra biografia e autobiografia. Le prospettive e i problemi della ricerca intorno alla vita di L. B. Alberti’, *La vita e il mondo di Leon Battista Alberti*, cit., I, 85–116, suggests as another possible source a Seneca passage which uses the phrase ‘*Quid enim?*’ as a Stoic equivalent of ‘*Quid tum?*’: Seneca, *De constantia sapientis* (*Dialogi*, 2.1.1–2). For Alberti’s approval of similar brief maxims in temples, see *De re aedificatoria*: ‘In temple walls and floors I want nothing that does not smack of pure philosophy. [. . .] It is right to place there those bits of advice which make us more just, modest and frugal, more adorned with virtue and pleasing to the gods above, for instance “be such as you would wish to appear”; “love and be loved”; and so on’ (VII, 10; p. 611).



tive, an early biography, but then comes the revolutionary idea of writing an ethical dialogue in the vernacular, quickly followed by the composition of the first technical treatise in the *volgare*, *De pictura*. Two other changes of direction come in his Latin works: first he systematically cultivates a humorous strain in works from the early *Intercenales* through the *Apologi* and the mock encomia (*Canis*, *Musca*) of the 1430s to the major novel *Momus*; secondly after 1443, probably after his departure from Florence, he becomes more interested in technical treatises, mostly short pieces apart from the major treatise on architecture. These shifts towards the vernacular, the humorous and the technical all stem from Alberti himself, and represent an inflection of humanism that would have been unthinkable in Petrarch, but what inspired Battista to do so? To take the first element, his interest in Tuscan began with his return to his ancestors' city of Florence in 1434, became sharpened by the humanist polemic of 1435 about whether a vernacular existed in ancient Rome, and culminated in the many writings and initiatives he undertook to promote the language. If Cicero's *Pro Archia* had inspired Petrarch to inaugurate the humanist movement, it was the new text of Alberti's age, Cicero's *Brutus*, that taught him that even Latin had started from humble beginnings and that the vernacular could therefore develop in the same way: the idea of gradual artistic progress was fundamental to Alberti, and it meant he could champion the vernacular on humanist grounds without having to invoke Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, whom he never names.

As for the humorous emphasis, this surfaced already in his early comedy, and was enhanced by his reading of Cicero's rhetorical works, as well as by his interest in Greek literature, in particular the reading of Aesop and Lucian, the latter's influence being particularly strong even in the late work *Momus*.

Thirdly, the contact with Florence, as Grayson suggested long ago, the city of Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio and Ghiberti, also stimulated his interest in the arts and led first to the treatise on painting and later to those on sculpture and architecture. There appears to be a logic also in the other technical works: *De pictura* made him think about the component parts of the art, just as the work on Tuscan grammar broke the language down into its basic elements, and this procedure holds true for the other treatises, as he analyses the constituent parts of painting, grammar, horses, city measurements, mathematical problems, sculpture, architecture and ciphers.

At first sight the *De re aedificatoria* appears to be Alberti's swansong to the written word, as the theoretical treatise gives way in the 1450s to

two decades of architectural work: his designs for S. Francesco in Rimini, then the Rucellai commissions in Florence, followed by the works carried out for the Gonzaga in Mantua. Yet two of his late literary works show that he never abandoned literature: the treatise on ciphers illustrated his fascination with letters which was already evident in the *Vita*, in the vernacular grammar, and in the inscriptions on his facades; and his final Tuscan dialogue on leadership, *De iciarchia* (1468), marked a return to the genre which he had himself inaugurated, the vernacular dialogue, and to a topic which brought him back full circle to his first dialogue on the family. The only difference is that by now, in the late 1460s, Battista Alberti the outsider, the illegitimate son of Lorenzo di Benedetto, was a major name in the city both in literary and architectural terms, and owned a share of the family palazzo in Florence that had belonged to his grandfather Benedetto Alberti.

Of course, Alberti was never as influential as Petrarch: there was no movement called Albertism to match Petrarchism. But in many ways he was ahead of his time, and his influence, though less immediate and widespread, did make an impact. He refounded Italian prose as a vehicle for dealing with serious ethical subjects, and this would be taken up later by Lorenzo de' Medici and Castiglione amongst others. His revival of the vernacular eclogue would lead to the vogue for the pastoral half a century or more later, culminating in Sannazaro's *Arcadia*, while many of the poems in the Certame Coronario found their way into the Raccolta Aragonese and thus helped shape the revival of Tuscan lyric in the age of Lorenzo de' Medici. His interest in Greek authors anticipated the Greek revival under Lorenzo at the end of the century, not to mention the Lucianic dimensions of such writers as Erasmus and Ariosto. His mathematical concerns would resurface in the works of his younger friend Luca Pacioli, and fellow theorist Piero della Francesca, while the architectural treatise would influence first Filarete, then Palladio and others. But most of all Alberti would have an impact on that other 'Renaissance man', Leonardo da Vinci: he was the most often cited modern author by Leonardo, and his *Apologhi* would inspire Leonardo's own fables.<sup>90</sup> In general terms, by writing his technical treatises in Latin he was respons-

<sup>90</sup> For his influence on Leonardo, see Marcello Ciccuto, 'Alberti verso le città ideali. La sua riflessione sul concetto di figura', in *Leon Battista Alberti: Actes du Congrès International de Paris*, I, 235–44; for the influence on Leonardo's fables, see Pierre Laurens, 'Le retour de l'Alberti Latin (*Apologues, Propos de table, Momus*): une poétique de l'allegorie', in Françoise Choay, Michel Paoli (eds.), *Alberti, humaniste, architecte*, pp. 111–27 (117); see also, Francesco P. Di Teodoro, 'L'influence de l'Alberti sur Raphael, Bramante et Léonard', *ibid.*, pp. 47–61.

ible for raising the status of the painter, the sculptor and the architect in Renaissance Italy, and paving the way for the esteem that would be enjoyed by other writer–artists. Alberti was the first writer–artist of the Italian Renaissance, and provided a model for those who came after: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Vasari, Cellini.

Perhaps it is best to end with Alberti’s own image of the humanities. In ‘Picturae’, one of the *Intercenales*, he describes a temple of Fortune which had ten images of good and evil forces painted on the walls. Amongst the good icons is of course ‘Humanitas’, and the ekphrasis of this painting is as follows:

In the first space [on the right wall] an extraordinary image of a woman was painted, who had many different faces sitting on top of her one neck: old, young, sad, merry, serious, witty and so on. In addition she had many hands emerging from her shoulders, one of which held pens, another a lyre, another a beautiful highly wrought gem, another a painted or sculpted emblem, another various mathematical instruments, while another held books. There was a name written above this image: Mother Humanitas.<sup>91</sup>

Once again Alberti’s notion of the humanities is emphatically varied and pluralistic, both serious and witty, and it embraces not just literature but the fine arts and mathematics as well. Perhaps if Alberti had been even more influential, the gap between ‘the two cultures’ would have been less wide, and this Italian lecture would take place not in the home of the humanities and social sciences but in a unified British Academy of Humanities, Mathematics and Sciences.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Namque loco primo mira imago adest picta mulieris, cui plurimi variique unam in cervicem vultus conveniunt: seniles, juveniles, tristes, iocosi, graves, faceti et eiusmodi. || Complurimas item manus ex iisdem habet humeris fluentes, ex quibus quidem alie calamos, alie lyram, alie laboratam concinnamque gemmam, alie pictum excultumque insigne, alie mathematicorum varia instrumenta, alie libros tractant. Huic superadscriptum nomen: Humanitas mater’ (Alberti, *Intercenali inedite*, p. 131).