THE
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

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SALUTATI

Savonarola had written a long treatise arguing that the study of the liberal arts, including the Greek and Roman classics, was not proper for children, and should only be granted to learned adults under carefully controlled circumstances. In his reply, Sulpicius considers the liberal arts individually, and attempts to show that all of them are essential to the education of a Christian, as well as intrinsically valuable. The excerpts which follow present his defenses of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, especially as these arts may be learned from their ancient secular sources. It is interesting to note how characteristically medieval much of Sulpicius' thinking is, even when he is defending humanistic studies. (From Humanism and Tyranny: Studies in the Italian Trecento, by Ephraim Emerton. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1919, pp. 245-64, Reprinted by permission of Harvard University Press)

From A Letter in Defense of Liberal Studies

I have read your book, reverend Father in Christ, and find it a veritable splendid of noonday in which is no darkness at all, and not, as you in your modesty call it, "A light shining in the darkness." After the Prologue you give us forty-seven chapters, following the letters of the passage you have chosen for your text [lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eum non comprehendunt], truly an enormous work, in which you have gathered many excellent selections and have displayed your vast learning to my great admiration.

Who would not marvel that so busy a man, continually occupied with spiritual affairs, preaching to the people the word of God, hearing and warning sinners in the secret of the confessional, speaking with God in prayer, hearing the voice of God as you read, soar- ing, as it were, above yourself on wings of contemplation—that a man, I say, thus occupied, having scarcely time for the necessary things of life, should have been able to put forth such a huge volume merely to settle one little question? But, when we are led by the goodness and the grace of God it is sure to happen that we can do more than we supposed, say, more than we could ask. He, that Spirit which is above us, goes beyond us and does more than we his...
what comes afterward. But many have the impression that you would like absolutely to forbid profane literature to Christians, which I distinctly say ought not to be done, and to this you agree, though only in part.

And indeed, most pious Sir, if you did not so earnestly place nobility of intellect above the will, the very opposite of what I maintained when I was discussing the nobility of law and medicine, perhaps I would avoid the burden of a reply, giving way to your authority and your revered character. But, since it will be a help to discuss this second point I will speak equally of both, so that you may see whether I did well in placing the nobility of the intellect lower than that of the will, and whether we ought to say that boys should not be initiated into profane literature, but should begin with the study of the sacred writings. Then, after you have seen what my opinion is on both these points, it shall be your part to amend, to correct, to change, or to cut out whatever arguments I shall put forth subject to your correction.

I will, then, begin with you, Reverend Father, a discussion, first as to whether it is more satisfactory and more convenient to commence our education with sacred literature or more useful to spend some time on profane studies, and this shall be my first discussion under six headings and shall form my first treatise. In the second place we will consider whether I was right in giving to the will precedence over the intellect, which seems not to be your opinion nor that of great and holy authorities in your Order. When this is done I will prepare a conclusion to the whole discussion, always subject to the Truth, to better judgment and to your correction, confident that, even though you remain of your present opinion, still you will not despise one who thinks otherwise.

In this I shall proceed the more freely because I shall not make any statement which in my opinion is an argument either for or against the faith; but if this latter should happen I hereby now revoke and condemn it. God has given his servant grace never to have had a thought contrary to the faith. Even when human reason seemed to contradict it I have never had the slightest hesitation. How could my intellect venture to dissent from Holy Scripture or in doubt about that which has been settled by the whole body of believers? I know not how it may be with others, but so it has al-
and all who labor under the lack of such training? They do not understand what they read, nor can they properly present it to others for their reading. 

A simple faith can, I admit, be perceived by the uneducated, but Holy Scripture and the commentaries and expositions of the learned they cannot understand. These can scarcely be comprehended by men of letters—I mean not those who have simply studied Grammar, but even those who have labored over Dialectics and Rhetoric. Grammar itself is in great part unintelligible without a knowledge of general facts [rerum], of how the essential nature of things changes, and how all the sciences work together—not to mention a knowledge of terminology. All studies in human affairs and in sacred subjects are bound together, and a knowledge of one subject is not possible without a sound and well-rounded education. 

But, however it may be with the ease or difficulty of learning Grammar, how about Christian doctrine itself? The Christian can with difficulty know just what he ought to believe, and if someone, on the authority of Scripture or of some reasoning however feeble, opposes him he will not know how to answer and will begin to waver in his faith. O, how many and what important questions do we bear every day which cannot be answered by mere crudity and a holy simplicity without the aid of learning? What would become of the whole body of the faithful if all were ignorant of letters or of Grammar? Of what avail would be the battle-line of believers against the heathen or against heretics without the learning supplied by Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric? 

Can any one deny that letters and Grammar were invented by the heathen and that, if those studies are to be forbidden to Christians, the art of Grammar itself will be closed to them? If this sounds absurd to us, why ought we entirely to reject the study of the heathen? Grammatical problems certainly cannot affect one’s belief. The science of Grammar does not discuss and examine matters pertaining to the faith and to salvation, and therefore there is no danger in this kind of inquiry; no error hostile to the faith can thus be introduced. If sciences are to be rejected on account of their inventors—and it is a well known fact that they were all invented by heathen—why was it that the Christians accepted them from heathen hands? Why did they not all go to pieces? Why are they not condemned by everyone? Why are they taught and studied in your monasteries? Believe me, venerable John, it is neither fair nor reasonable to send into exile, as it were, the many teachings and traditions of the heathen, to exclude them from Christian homes, except insofar as they are opposed to the faith and to the conclusions of holy Fathers.

Nur do I think it fair, because one or another held a bad opinion of our faith, to proscribe the learning which he has handed down to us. The error of an author is one thing; the falseness or the conception of the science he has invented is another. So that even if a heathen, a publican, a heretic, or a criminal has told the truth or professed a science harmless in itself, the truth he has spoken cannot be condemned on account of the faults of the author. . . .

The art of Grammar comes first in order and in [use of] perception. It was, beyond all doubt, invented by heathen, whether we consider its discovery or its development. This we have to assume both from reason and from necessity, and, since we can acquire it from no other source than that from which it was derived, namely from the heathen, and since Christians, even though they have commented upon it, have most certainly taken all they say from the heathen, why do you forbid this and other studies for Christians? Whence did the primitive Church learn how to express itself if not from the heritage of the heathen? When the call of God came to the nations and was accepted by them, how could they have learned to know the sacred writings and to understand their teachings and their purpose if they had been ignorant of their own learning, that is of Greek and Latin Grammar? Why do you cause this subject to be taught and studied in your own congregations and churches? On this point I think I have said enough, and I do not believe that you, when you have read the above, will deny its truth; in spite of what appears to be your absolute prohibition of prose studies to Christians.

Quintilian [c.35-95 A.D.; Roman authority on eloquence] says, if I may very briefly quote his own words, that this science is divided into two parts, the art of correct speech and the interpretation of the press, and hence it has more in reserve than is shown on the surface. And further on he says:
It is not enough to have read the poets; every kind of writing should be studied carefully, not only for the contents, but also for the words, which often derive their force from the authors who use them. Grammar is incomplete without music, when we have to speak of meter and rhythm. If it be ignorant of astronomy it cannot understand the poets who, not to mention other things, are continually making use of the rising and setting of the constellations in their descriptions of time. Nor can it ignore philosophy on account of the numerous passages in almost all poets drawn from an intimate familiarity with the philosophy of Nature [i.e., natural science], as, e.g., Empedocles among the Greeks and Varro and Lucretius among the Latins, who delivered their message of wisdom in verse. Furthermore we need no small degree of eloquence if we would speak truly and appropriately in each proposition we have demonstrated.

When Fabius [Quintillian] had said this, he added:

Wherefore those persons are not to be tolerated who criticize this science as trifling and vacant, for unless it has laid solid foundations for the future orator, whatever he builds thereon will fall to the ground.

It is a necessity for youth, a joy to the aged, a sweet companion in solitude, the only element in every form of study which has more of utility than of display.

Thus M. Fabius Quintilianus, that most highly cultivated writer, in the first book of his Institutes of Oratory.

To this should be added, in order to show the wide scope of this discipline, the work of Marcius Minus Felix Capella, in which after the first two books describing the marriage of Philology and Mercury, he sets forth with the perfection of brevity the doctrine of the seven liberal arts.

So that, since it is the function of Grammar to know these arts and to teach them, and since this branch of learning should precede all others, and since it is a part of the heritage of the Nation, it follows logically and of necessity that, far from being prohibited to Christians, it ought to be placed before all other studies. But if this I have spoken elsewhere; and now, having said enough about Grammar we will go on to Logic.

II

Who can deny that Dialectics, being an inquiry after truth, which is the sole object of all liberal arts and of every science, is a necessary study for Christian men? Our faith is the supreme Truth, and we come to it through truths without number. Since then this science is the instrument for discovering and estimating truth, who cannot see that it is a necessity to Christian believers in reaching the goal of Christian truth? Shall not the believer begin by learning first the substance of the faith, and then, after he has made a habit of this, as you would have him do, turn to the studies by which he may comprehend and defend what he has already perceived?

Tell me, my venerable John, when can any one be fortified on every side in purity of faith by human reason unless he reach this truth through the discussion of those endless doubts by which it is wont to be weakened and through knowing and removing many arguments on one side and the other? It is most true, as Democritus, quoted by Cicero, said, that Nature has hidden the truth in deepest mystery. So that, if Nature has hidden her truths, that is, natural truths—for he knew of no others—in such depths, what shall we think of that infinite power whose nature is such that we do well to call it supernatural—especially since the truths of Nature are finite, while this power must be acknowledged as infinite. In what depth, what pit, what abyss does supernatural truth lie concealed?

But now, the things we hold by faith alone being of such a nature that natural reason cannot reach them, it is easy for some fiction of human reasoning to shake them from the place they once held. Therefore it is necessary for neophytes to learn, together with the doctrine, the means by which to defend it. Who would allow raw recruits, untrained in military affairs, without teaching in the principles of war, to be placed at the post of danger unarmed and not even knowing with what weapons to defend themselves or to attack the enemy? With what reason could they be used even in a slight skirmish? Let them learn at one and the same time to handle weapons, to fight, to conquer and to meet danger, lest at
the first encounter they should be struck with terror and beat a
retreat or, if they cannot escape, should be captured.

So much for Logic, which acts on the intellect with compelling
force by means of reasoning. Now let us pass on to Rhetoric, which
accompanies Logic, but acts upon the will. Both of these aim at the
same goal but by different ways. The one enlightens the mind to
an intellectual conviction; the other brings it into a willing attitude,
or, to put it in another way, the one proves in order to teach; the
other persuades in order to guide.

III

I know not how to carry on this discussion more effec-
tively than by using the words of Saint . . . Augustine. In the
fourth book of his De Doctrina Christiana he solves the problem as
follows:

The art of Rhetoric may be used to persuade both to truth and to
falsehood, and who dare say that the truth (as the person of its de-
fenders) ought to stand unaided against falsehood so that those who
are trying to persuade men to falsehood shall know how to make
their audience friendly and interested and receptive from the start,
while the champions of truth shall not know how to do this? But
the former present falsehood tersely, clearly, and pleasantly while
the latter set forth the truth so that it is tedious to hear, difficult to
understand, and unattractive to believe? Are the former to oppose
truth with fallacious arguments and false assertions, while the latter
are unable to defend the truth or to refute falsehood? Shall the former
turn the minds of their hearers to error, terrify, sadden, appall, and
exult in a glowing speech, while the latter are cold, slow, and languid in
the defense of truth? Who is such a fool as to call this wisdom? Since, then,
the art of eloquence standing between the two can persuade power-
fully to either good or evil, why is no preparation made by good art
to fight for the truth when evil men are using this art in the service
of wrong or error to gain their own vain and wicked ends?

Such are the words of the holy father Augustine. And now, then.
Does it really seem to you that this famous doctor is forbidding
Christians and to those entering upon the way of God, the study of

Rhetoric, although it is the heritage of Cicero, the special weapon of
the heathen, their sword and spear? He saw in others and felt in
himself how easily scholars allow Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric
to make their way into theological truth. He saw how necessary
these are to beginners in order to learn and to understand the
sacred writings. He remembered what a protection they were to
him when he had fallen into the Munchausian heresy, how they had
saved him from remaining, through ignorance, in the error in
which he had been caught. He did not forget that the first glory
of his salvation flashed upon him out of the darkness of Cicero, the
man whose language, as he himself says, was admired by almost
everyone—not so, however, his soul!
crude and ignorant one? Finally, since the whole trivium is a way
and a means, not an end, and is planned so that through it we
become able to learn other things and not that we may rest in it,
is it not a preposterous and utterly ridiculous idea after the end has
been reached to go back and work around to the goal again? If, as
you would have it, after we have learned what pertains to the faith
and have become well grounded therein, these [literary] subjects
are to be studied, tell me, I pray you, to what end? Is it for their
own sakes? But they are not an end in themselves. Is it that we may
progress further? But we shall already have passed the boundary
and left behind us the final goal of all learning!

I can see no reason for this opinion, my dear John, unless it were
that, finding you have not reached your goal, you follow the ex-
ample of men who have lost their way and have strayed from the
true, straight, and well-worn path and so you turn back to the point
at which you wandered away. But enough of this! . . .

PETRUS PAULUS
VERGERIUS, The Elder

Even the simplest circumstances of Verg erius' life have been
much disputed, but it is now generally accepted that he was
born in Capo d'Istria in 1370, and died in Budapest in 1444.
He was educated in Padua and Florence, where he studied
Greek under the great Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras.
He appears to have been a doctor of law, medicine, and philos-
ophy, and he served for some years as professor of logic in
the University of Padua. He was familiar with the major intel-
lectual developments of his time, and accepted elements of
both humanism and scholasticism. After 1440, Vergerius be-
came increasingly involved in ecclesiastical questions, and
played an active role at the councils of Constance and Basle.
He then entered the service of the Emperor, in which he seems
to have remained for the rest of his life.

The treatise De Ingeniis Moribus ("concerning excellent
traits") probably was written between 1490 and 1492. Not only
one of the first educational treatises produced by a humanist
writer, it was also one of the most influential. It survives in
many manuscripts, went through many printed editions, and
was widely known and respected well into the sixteenth cen-
tury. The work is addressed to Ubertinus, the young son of
Francesco Carrara, the lord of Padua, and it succinctly sum-
marizes the educational ideals that came to be fostered in the
humanistic schools attached to Northern Italian princely courts
during this period. Many of the characteristic themes of hu-
manist educational thought emerge here—the relationship
of arms and learning, the importance of physical as well as
mental development, the need for a familiarity with all of the