

## The Power of the Text in Humanist Culture: Valla and the Donation of Constantine

The humanist movement of the Renaissance has been interpreted by historians in contrasting ways as being scientifically regressive or progressive, religiously reformist or secularly classicizing, predominantly literary and educational or broadly philosophical. Whatever the assessment, however, there can be little doubt that humanist culture was founded on the revival of ancient learning, and especially on a renewed reading and adaptation of written texts.<sup>1</sup>

The literary humanists, all could perhaps agree, were explorers who sought to recover and understand texts from the past: they restored lost works, discovered new ones, integrated fragmentary texts, and emended those that were already known. And all this through procedures that involved transcribing, collecting, collating, translating and interpreting texts. In so doing Renaissance scholars acquired a greater familiarity with ancient writing and thus increased the existing body of knowledge quantitatively. But their contribution did not end there: it embraced a qualitative change too, for, by developing a new critical methodology, they freed themselves from medieval commentaries and scholastic approaches and began to study authors and texts in a fresh manner. They historicized them and evaluated them more objectively, showing a greater appreciation of the differences and distances among them as well as between the works analyzed and themselves.<sup>2</sup>

In these endeavours the humanists fashioned new tools for analysis and exegesis, and laid the foundations for the discipline of modern philology. Moreover, as they concerned themselves not only with the question of reading but also with that of writing, they revived rhetorical forms of expression with a view to presenting their own ideas more effectively according to the classical rules of composition.<sup>3</sup> Their pursuits involving texts were, therefore, analytical and hermeneutic on the one hand, constructive and creative, on

the other. And the text had an important role for them both as an inwardly directed vehicle for the reception and comprehension of knowledge and as an active and outward moving means of forceful persuasion. It should be noted that, as they looked to the past, humanists did not turn their backs on the present, nor did they analyze texts exclusively for the sake of erudition in its own right; rather, their scholarly activities were often tied to important issues of the day, as were their original writings.

The text, adaptable to philological and rhetorical applications, and seen by the humanists both as a source for the transmission of learning and as an instrument for influencing reality, found its essence in the word, its basic component part. The philological process focussed on the examination of words and the rhetorical exercise involved the utilization of words; in both cases the point of departure was the *verbum*. In fact the cult of the word is one of the chief characteristics of humanist thought. Speech was singled out by Poggio Bracciolini in the early fifteenth century, for example, as the main distinguishing feature of the human species, and human discourse as the necessary medium through which ideas take shape.<sup>4</sup> Hence the high esteem for Cicero's teachings on rhetoric and the great excitement experienced by Bracciolini upon discovering a complete manuscript of Quintilian whose treatise taught in great detail the possibilities for realizing all the potentialities of language.

This heightened sense of the importance of words, and of the power of the text which they create, is evident in the thought and writings of one of the leading Italian humanists, namely Lorenzo Valla.

A proud Roman, who lived in the first half of the fifteenth century (1407-57), Valla studied the classics, partly on his own, but also with distinguished teachers, some of whom were colleagues of his family members who worked in the papal chancery. Unable to secure employment there himself as he wished, he travelled to Northern Italy where, among other activities, he taught rhetoric at the University of Pavia for a brief period from 1431 to 1433 until he became embroiled in one of his frequent polemics and was forced to resign. He obtained a more stable appointment as counsellor, historian, secretary to the king of Naples, Alfonso V of Aragon, and from 1435 to 1448 he followed the monarch even on his military campaigns. During this

period Valla composed some of his most controversial works and, suspected of heresy, was interrogated by the Inquisition in Naples (1444), but released after Alfonso intervened. He succeeded finally in overcoming opposition from his rivals in Rome and was allowed to return to his native city. Engaged first as letter writer to Pope Nicholas V in 1448 and then as full-fledged apostolic Secretary to Callixtus III in 1455, he also spent the last seven years of his life teaching rhetoric at the University of Rome.

Valla is the author of a number of important works, all written in Latin and mostly of a polemical nature. They treat a host of subjects ranging from Latin Grammar and stylistics to the ethical concept of the true good, and cover topics relating to law, religion, theology, dialectic and philosophy. The *Annotations on the New Testament* represents an innovative contribution to Biblical philology. First published by Erasmus in 1505, it, together with other works by Valla, had significant repercussions among the Northern humanists and Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century.

Valla's belief in the importance of language and the power of the text manifests itself both in his theoretical pronouncements and in his writing style. Echoing other humanists before him (Coluccio Salutati, for example<sup>5</sup>), Valla, in the prefaces to his treatise on *The Elegance of the Latin Language* (1441-48), stressed that grammar, that is the study of language, is the first step along the road to knowledge; it is indeed the basis for the pursuit of such disciplines as law and theology. A similar notion is expressed in the versified *Art of Grammar* (1442-43) attributed to him: "all disciplines," it is written, "need grammar, but Grammar needs no other, and those who are ignorant of this art feed on polenta mush."<sup>6</sup> In other words, one must grasp the meaning of words separately and in combination before hoping to be able to proceed to an understanding of the overall message of any text. Valla found the Latin language particularly enriching: he called it sacramental since it had enabled the Romans to spread their highly evolved civilization to many peoples (*Eleg.*, preface to Book I).

He held equally strong positions on the subject of composition and repeatedly stressed the need to make use of rhetorical strategies in order to produce the most effective writing. In typical Renaissance fashion, rhetoric was not conceived in the pejorative sense as

mere superficial ornamentation nor was it restricted to the field of public orations. Originally intended not only to teach and delight, but also to move, it involved verbal persuasion through an appeal to emotions and imagination—a goal humanists sought in all manner of literary genres. Valla was highly critical of mediaeval dialectic that appealed solely to the intellect and relied on cold and exceedingly abstruse syllogistic reasoning. In his *Disputations on Dialectic* (first redacted in 1439 and revised in 1443–44) he praises the methods of the orators over those of the scholastic philosophers. The rhetorical method, he argues, is more valid since it is based on probability and makes use of ordinary language rather than abstract terminology or distinctions. In his work on *Profession of the Religious* he recommends that even works on religion and ethics be composed “in the style of oratory, according to ancient custom, rather than that of philosophy.”<sup>7</sup> In proposing as a model the language of ancient theologians, he also singles out those who followed in the Pauline tradition. According to the assessment he provides in his sermon *In Praise of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1457), St. Paul had used a forceful style filled with utterances that, as Valla phrases it, “do battle.”<sup>8</sup>

The grammatical and rhetorical emphasis on concrete and dynamic language and the scorn for metaphysical subtleties, advocated in many of Valla's writings, are essential aspects of the methodology on which his treatise *On the Donation of Constantine* (1440) is founded. A provocative text, as most of those in his repertoire are, it is perhaps the most controversial of all. In it he applies his philological and oratorical skills to the resolution of the textual problem and to the clarification of the hotly debated political and religious question of the donation: he analyzes historical documents and presents the results of his research in a strongly worded tract which aims to demonstrate the falsity of the legend.<sup>9</sup>

It was an age-old belief that the Emperor Constantine the Great (d. 337) had donated temporal power to Sylvester I, Bishop of Rome (314–335), after converting to Christianity and recovering from leprosy. This gift, supposedly granted back in the fourth century, was the justification many popes of the late Middle Ages had cited, either sincerely or through guile, for their intervention in political affairs and their claim to the right to investiture. However, the document reporting the alleged donation, that is the *Constitutum Constantini*

charter, was actually drawn up in the eighth century, and an abridged version of it was incorporated into Church law, through Paucapalea's interpolations, four hundred years later in the mid-twelfth century. The document consisted of a series of declarations which Constantine supposedly made in the year 313; in them he announced the primacy of the Church of Rome and of its head, declared the power of the pope to be superior to that of the emperor, and granted land and other privileges to Sylvester. Although scholars before Valla had questioned the legality of the donation or had denounced its disastrous effects on the spiritual role of the Church, it was Valla who provided definitive and exhaustive proof that the document was indeed spurious and that the donation had never taken place. Some brief evidence of its apocryphal nature had been presented earlier by Nicholas of Cusa, for one, but it was buried within an accommodating work (*On Catholic Harmony* of 1433) which advocated the reconciliation between emperor and pope and had little impact on the resolution of the problem.

Valla, on the other hand, gathers together some old arguments and many new ones, and provides a thorough discussion of the issue, even though he does not deal with the identity of the author or the geographical origin of the forgery—questions which modern scholars have debated. In spite of these limitations, he presents all his data in a treatise which is structured in such a way as to exploit to the maximum the perlocutionary potential of the text. He admits at the very beginning of his treatise that he is being altogether revolutionary in attacking current beliefs upheld by papal authority. Nevertheless, claiming the right to dissent, he speaks out courageously and explains: "My purpose is not to speak ill of any person. . . . Rather, I seek to eradicate error from men's minds" (I, 2: 63). In his usual search for truth, he states that he has carried out a careful examination of ancient sources and of various manuscripts of the *Decretum*, only to discover that contemporary accounts of the period had recorded no donation and that the oldest compilations of Church law did not contain the charter in question.

In addition to the conclusions reached, what is of utmost significance in Valla's work is the method—philological and at the same time rhetorical—by means of which he argues his case. By carefully analyzing the text of the donation document almost word by word,

he detects a number of cultural anachronisms, linguistic discrepancies, and geographical oddities in it. Among the references made to the customs and attire of the protagonists involved in the alleged transfer of power, the text refers to the pope's bejewelled diadem when, in fact, silk caps were still worn by pontiffs at the time. The word *datum* appears in a closing phrase of the charter, when such practice was followed only in the drafting of letters which were to be delivered to a specific addressee. The mention of Constantinople is an obvious blunder, since the city had not yet been founded and the site was known at that time as Byzantium. Along with examples of grammatical barbarisms, Valla detected implausible linguistic usage in words like *satraps* which was foreign to fourth-century vocabulary describing the political organization of the Empire. Valla uses similar philological evidence to support other arguments too: through the analysis of the history, etymology, and usage of key words, he is able to demonstrate, for example, that since the term *clergy* in its Greek etymology means 'lot' or 'portion,' in the sense of destiny, Sylvester, whose lot as bishop of Rome was a supremely celestial one, could not have accepted Constantine's gift. So even the use of this term, let alone the idea of the transaction itself, undermines the forger's credibility.

As for the general structure of the charter's narrative content, Valla finds that the tale of the donation smacks of a rewriting of the Biblical story of Naaman the Syrian who, cured, by Elisha, offered him gifts. This similarity, along with the fact that the story of Constantine's conversion recalls parts of the early legend of Sylvester, points to the inherently mythical quality of the charter.

Besides the internal evidence provided by the language and form of the text, Valla offers arguments relating to external matters: from a legal standpoint, it would have been contrary to earthly law for the emperor to have carried out such a transfer of power, and contrary to divine law for the pope to have accepted. Moreover, had it occurred, the Papacy could no longer expect to reclaim its lost power by law. From the point of view of verisimilitude, then, the notion of a donation is highly unlikely. Valla's analysis, based on the rhetorical criterion of common-sense plausibility and on that of human experience and behaviour, as De Caprio has observed,<sup>10</sup> takes psychological factors into account too. It is part of human nature to

be acquisitive, and rulers invariably aim at enlarging their territory, not at giving it away. "How can you believe such things which go beyond [the limits of] men's opinions?", Valla asks, at one point in his discussion (VIII, 28).

In addition to the vast number of improbabilities and anachronistic elements present in the text, Valla discovers that there is a lack of external documentation which could support the view that the donation had taken place: not only did historical works written at the time of the donation make no mention of the event, but neither had any coins commemorating it come down.

The cogency of Valla's arguments is evident. But what makes his treatise uniquely convincing is the presence of verbal strategies, true speech acts, with which he elects to do battle against the credulous. Utilizing the rhetorical devices that had become essential writing instruments for the humanists, he structures his work as an "oration" (III, 7: p. 65), as he calls it, one to be inscribed more precisely under the rubric of judicial oratory, as De Caprio has pointed out.<sup>11</sup> As to its specific nature, Valla stated in one of his letters that his work on the donation was one long dispute.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed rather than a straightforward third-person discussion it takes the shape of an inquiry during the course of which the prosecutor-narrator calls a group of witnesses, dead and alive, to testify in the case or *causa*, as he terms it (XXII, 70). As a rhetorically structured transcript of the court proceedings addressed to the kings and princes of his time, the treatise reports a series of fictitious speeches delivered, in two instances, by the sorrowful members of the Emperor's family, who plead with the Emperor not to deprive them of their inheritance, and by representatives of the government of Rome who come forward to voice their anger over the loss of power and territory. These impersonations serve to explain, in human terms, the feelings and motives of the various actors who would have been involved in this living drama. The interrogation focusses on the imagined testimony of those who uphold the truthfulness of the donation and of the forger himself who, it is said, should be dragged into court (XI, 37). With a great deal of moral indignation the investigator subjects them to rigid questioning with such vehemence that the interrogatives he formulates, blended at certain moments with imperatives urging them to speak up (VIII, 30), are not the usual,

sometimes bland kind of rhetorical questions; they take on, instead, the force of real verbal abuse. The prosecutor stresses how wrong and improbable it would have been for the donation to have taken place, and, furthermore, how utterly absurd it was for anyone to believe it had. In a particularly vituperative tone, he accuses the forger of being dishonest, an evil villain, and a stupid ass, and his credulous contemporaries, of being mad, ridiculous, ignorant fools. He hurls these insults like lethal weapons in his attempt, as he explains, "to deal the fatal blow to [his] adversaries' cause, which has already been beaten and torn to bits, and to slit its throat with a single slash" (X, 34: p. 68). As scholars have observed,<sup>13</sup> Valla uses a remarkable number of such military images throughout the treatise, in the tradition of Quintilian and Saint Paul. Making words his verbal weapons, he attacks the gullible with irony too, as in the punning passage: "Oh, what an astonishing event! The Roman Empire was both acquired and lost by Christian priests so calmly and quietly. . . . You would think that *Sylvester* had reigned in *sylvan* places amid trees, rather than in Rome among men" [emphasis mine] (VIII, 30: p. 67).

Interestingly enough, all these forms of verbal aggression are used in a context which is presented literally as an act of self-defence. At the outset the narrator-lawyer depicts himself as a victim who finds himself in a situation similar to that of the Biblical heroes Jeremiah and St. Paul, forced to defend the truth against evil aggressors (I, 2). Using what we might call the rhetoric of deviation he veils with a defensive surface cover what is in effect a violent attack of his own. Other instances might include the figure of preterition used to attenuate the criticism of priests (XXVI, 85) and the high praise of the holy pope towards the end which recalls, by contrast, his sharp criticism of contemporary counterparts (XXVIII, 93-XXIX, 94).

Resorting to other tactics as well, Valla has his protagonist-narrator-champion clinch one round of the courtroom battle with a passionate apostrophe to none other than Christ who, he prays, will "hurl avenging thunderbolts" against the perpetrator of the horrendous falsification (XV, 49: p. 70). By fashioning his work as a series of such addresses to specific individuals (popes, kings, Constantine, the credulous, the forger and so on) Valla creates a sense of immediate orality and direct communication. Dramatic scenes are recited too, as when *Sylvester* speaks directly to Constantine and turns down his



gift, quoting the words of Christ and Paul from the Bible in support of his refusal (VI, 20–21). In another instance, the lawyer asks the person responsible for the charter proclamations, if he is indeed Conatantine, to explain his strange statements (XIX, 62). The stress on speech is evident, furthermore, in the fact that the entire treatise, which is one long oration, organized into clearly discernible parts extending from exordium to peroration, according to the traditional scheme, includes the other briefer discourses of the characters already described. These, in turn, often contain quotations from other texts, as we have seen. And, of course, the spoken declarations of the charter are cited phrase by phrase by the prosecutor in his interrogation of the forger. What emerges from this speech-within-a-speech formation is a multilayered dialogue, which not only presents a multitude of argumentative approaches, but also highlights textuality and discourse in its very design.

Each segment, moreover, is directed literally to one specifically named person or group of persons, addressed as “you,” yet the second-person pronoun, even as it is continually displaced from character to character, inevitably impacts on the implied audience outside the text. The reader, though addressed indirectly, is thus engaged in the debate. Furthermore, as the discourse alternates between the second and third persons, when the prosecutor refers to the forger as “you” and then shifts suddenly to “he” (e.g., XII, 38–40), clearly directing his remarks to the general audience, it is evident that the audience is being called upon to pass judgment in the trial. What the result will be is no mystery: the receiver of the text cannot help but share the scorn heaped by the narrator on the foolish forger and also wish to distance itself from the ingenuous believers repeatedly and sarcastically held up to ridicule for their stupidity.

On the basis of these features the text clearly achieves the goal of effective persuasion. The sheer number of the arguments, and the forcefulness of each, together with the high emotional charge created by the various discursive strategies, make the total effect quite overwhelming.

However Valla himself had stated that rhetoric is to be employed, not simply to win debates, but mainly in order to reach truth.<sup>14</sup> The orator must be a moral individual, as the rhetoricians of antiquity had taught, so that rhetoric would not be made to serve dishonest ends.

Some readers have doubted Valla's own sincerity in this rhetorical composition of his and have pointed out that his polemical stance on the issues treated, and the degree of sharpness in his attacks on the Church in particular, may be due to personal and historical circumstances. Valla had, of course, been denied a position in the curia by Eugene IV, a pope whom he pitilessly accuses of cowardice and incompetence here (XXVIII, 91). Moreover, at the time he penned his treatise, he was in the service of King Alfonso, precisely during the period in which the king, struggling with the pope for control of Naples, lent his support to the conciliar movement which opposed absolute papal authority. In light of this, Valla's work has sometimes been dismissed as mere pro-Aragonese propaganda.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the views on religion expressed here—evangelical, reformist, orthodox and characteristic of the age of humanism—are perfectly consistent with those Valla presented in other works both of the same period, *The Profession of the Religious*, for instance. Even later, towards the end of his life when he had attained personal independence and security, he praises Pauline spirituality and indicts scholastic culture, in his sermon on St. Thomas. In typical fashion, the *Donation of Constantine* severely chastises the corrupt popes of the day, but without rejecting the Church or the Pope's authority. References to papal "dignity" and "majesty," found toward the beginning of the discussion (II, 5: p. 64) and in the closing phrase (XXX, 99: p. 72), frame the treatise in orthodoxy. In denouncing corruption, Valla simply exhorts the Pontiff to return to the more spiritual ways of his early predecessors and of the origins of Christianity. He includes glowing praise of Sylvester, for example, calls him "a most holy man" (XXX, 98: p. 71; cf. "holy man," VII, 27: p. 67), and, in the drama performed before us, gives him a most noble role to play and lines filled with devotion to declaim. It is worthy of note, moreover, that in his *Apology* addressed to the pope in defence of his writings in 1444, when Valla was not yet free from the threat of the Inquisition and the opposition to him in Rome, he offers no compliant retraction of his treatise. Similarly, in a letter of 1443 written to appeal his ban from Rome, although he makes some attempt to justify his writing the donation tract, saying he was forced to do so, he also explains that he wrote it out of love for truth and religion, and not to offend the pope.<sup>16</sup> Of course, the treatise did create a furor not only while it

circulated in manuscript form, and during the author's lifetime, but also in the early sixteenth century when it was first published and translated into the vernacular languages, and, made widely available, shocked reformers like Luther.

Valla always considered himself a soldier fighting for his religion and viewed his activities (including those of a literary nature) as battles directed against error and corruption for the sake of "truth," "justice," and "God," as he proclaims at the beginning of the oration (I, 2: p. 63). And he certainly made good use of written texts to expound his deeply felt personal convictions. The treatise on *The Donation of Constantine*, in particular, demonstrates just how forceful that exposition could be for, in addition to providing an unabashed expression of his religious views, a skilful solution to a textual puzzle, and the debunking of the most famous forgery in history, it also shows in a concrete way the power that the text has to attack and interrogate, insult and humiliate, indeed to overcome and conquer. And although it may carry out these actions only through perlocution, in a verbal, quasi-fictional manner, and in order to defeat an earlier text, it ultimately achieves its humanist goal of affecting man's perception of truth and altering his way of thinking.

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#### NOTES

- 1 For a recent defence of the scientific nature of humanist textual scholarship, see the introduction to Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991.
- 2 Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, tr. Peter Munz. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965, esp. pp. 11, 14.
- 3 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979; Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition*. Univ. Park: Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 1980.
- 4 Poggio Bracciolini, Letter to Guarino Veronese, in Phyllis Walter Goodhart Gordan (ed. & tr.), *Two Renaissance Book Hunters*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1974, pp. 193-196. Cf. Quintilian, II, xvi, 12-13.
- 5 Coluccio Salutati, in his letter to Ciovanni Dominici on liberal studies (1406), defines grammar as "the gateway to all the liberal arts and to all learning, human and divine." (Ephraim Emerton, [*Humanism and Tyranny: Studies in the Italian Trecento*]. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1925; rpt. 1964, p. 351.)

- 6 Lorenzo Valla, *L'arte della grammatica*, ed. Paola Casciano. Milano: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla & Arnoldo Mondadori editore, 1990, vv. 21–22: “indiga grammaticae queque ars est, nullius illa, / quam qui non norunt vescuntur pulte profecto” (p. 6).
- 7 Lorenzo Valla, “*The Profession of the Religious*” and the Principal Arguments from “*The Falsely-Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine*,” tr. & ed. Olga Zorzi Pusliese (Renaissance and Reformation Texts in Translation 1). Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Victoria University in the University of Toronto, 1985, p. 54. Subsequent page references to this work are given in parentheses in the body of the paper. A complete English translation of the *Donation* is that by Christopher B. Coleman, published in New Haven by Yale Univ. Press in 1922.
- 8 Lorenzo Valla, “In Praise of Saint Thomas Aquinas,” in Leonard A. Kennedy (ed.), *Renaissance Philosophy: New Translations*. The Hague: Mouton, 1973, p. 24.
- 9 The analysis of Valla’s work which follows is based on the introduction and notes that I have included in an Italian edition of the *Donation*, with Latin text facing, to be published soon.
- 10 Vincenzo De Caprio, “Retorica e ideologia nella *Declamatio* di Lorenzo Valla sulla donazione di Costantino,” *Paragone* 338 (1978), 36–56, provides an excellent study of the norms of behaviour which constitute the fundamental criterion on which Valla bases his arguments.
- 11 De Caprio, p. 45.
- 12 Lorenzo Valla, Letter to Guarino Veronese (1443), in *Epistole*, ed. Ottavio Besomi & Mariangela Regoliosi. Padova: Antenore, 1984: “prope tota in contentione versatur” (p. 245).
- 13 Mario Fois, *Il pensiero cristiano di Lorenzo Valla nel 20 quadro storico-culturale del suo ambiente*. Roma: Libreria Editrice dell’Università Gregoriana, 1969, p. 481.
- 14 Lorenzo Valla, *On Pleasure*, tr. Maristella Lorch & A. Kent Hieatt. New York: Abaris Books, 1977, p. 87.
- 15 e.g., Fois, pp. 319–324.
- 16 Valla, Letter to cardinal Ludovico Trevisan (1443), in *Epistole*, pp. 247–248.