Christian Humanism
in the Fourth Century: Saint Jerome

In the history of the confrontation between the cultural forms of classical antiquity and the growing influence of the Gospel, the concept of Christian humanism is frequently presented as the combination of the best that each had to offer to the civilizing of the Western world. There are obvious and very sound reasons behind this choice. Humanism has always seemed a most natural choice of word for describing whatever elements characterized the cultural refinement of the classical spirit at its best, and Christian, as a specific form of humanism, asserts that it is in the Christian view of man that humanism reaches its happiest development.

There are problems in using these words, as well. The concept of Christian humanism is, historically, more regularly applied to a much later era, the late Middle Ages or the Renaissance, an age that evolved a far fuller picture of the role of man within the Christian scheme of things. This is not to say that the role of man is, by its nature, uncongenial or wanting to the Christian point of view. However, it is possible that a scholar who looks closely at the fourth century might conclude that the Christian philosophy had not yet evolved its philos-
ophy of man to the point where it could add significantly to pagan humanism.

One must in fact observe that the two elements, Christian and humanism, do not always articulate perfectly: too often they contradict each other in areas where actually there was the raw stuff of an eventual synthesis that could have promoted the most cherished objectives of each element.

One difficulty arises from the fact that the application of the terms Christian and humanism to the fourth century involves some extrapolation. The terms are carried back over several centuries of development, and what the Christian humanist's view of the world must have been after Dante is, to some degree, predicated upon what it could have been only in potentia in the fourth century.

Definitions

The problem can be approached by two kinds of definition. The first is in terms of essence. Humanism is essentially the philosophy that proclaims the central importance of the role played by man, and Christian, broadly speaking, means pertaining to, or characterized by, the philosophy of the Gospel.

What is really needed, however, is not so much a simple definition in terms of essence as a phenomenological approximation of the concepts involved, an awareness of the range of meaning gradually appropriated by the terms, and determined ultimately by the historical circumstances in which they developed and the peculiar limitations of the broader areas to which historically they have been applied. Thus Christian must be distinguished into denominatively Christian and historically Christian; humanism into the Renaissance
culture we know by that name, with the rediscovered human values it sought to assert, and what is more denominatively humanistic, that is, the exaltation of the role of man. There are those who could not possibly admit the term *Christian humanism* as applied to the fourth century in any conceivable frame of reference. *Christian* here is not the Christian of Apostolic or sub-Apostolic times. It is Roman Christianity, in some respects more a cultural milieu than a spiritual challenge, yet still demanding fresh impetus for its Gospel. At the same time, it is not the Christianity of our own day with all its dogma well worked out.

In much the same way it is indeed probable that the humanism of fifth-century Athens could claim logically to exclude the very notion of a Christian humanism, for, by definition, the "intellectual search for and interest in the true nature of man"¹ is inherently opposed to either enlightenment from a god or the eventual reduction of human effort to an ancillary status vis-à-vis the divine. Historically, this rigorous application of the terms has generally been avoided. Humanism can equally well apply to the philosophy that asserts the primacy of the human role in a universe in which there are gods, or in which there is a God. The first chapter of Genesis, for example, is a bold though essentially preliminary step toward the exaltation and liberation of man from the superstitious fear of gods and demons and existential insecurities of every kind, yet it is set squarely in a theocentric context. The same is true of belief in an afterlife. It can free a man for further concentration on the dignity of his human role just as well as it can violate what might be claimed to be the philosophical limitations of humanism: man must be left to his own resources. In a word, there is nothing in the belief in a divinity, per se, to exclude the harmonious
linking of the two terms under consideration. Humanism can ideally be Christian, and Christianity can, in principle, be humanistic.

There have been, moreover, changes in the meaning of the key concepts. Thus, a Christian humanism without the external trappings and modes of thought proper to the Renaissance would be inconceivable from one point of view, no matter how secondary some of these elements might actually be to an essential definition of either humanism or Christianity. This is the precaution with which we must approach a consideration of the historical hallmarks of humanism: concern with man, with letters, with the past, with a classical ideal for art and society that is meant to be largely normative, and with the objectives and ideals of what we have come to know as liberal or humane education.

So much for the historically determined definition. From another point of view it is more important to examine the essential definition of the terms. For then one can not only get at the fundamental elements but one can look back into history to identify the first appearances of trends or attitudes or spirit that can be recognized as denominative elements of Christian humanism. We are thus ultimately forced into the position of using terms that have become overgrown with layers of meaning, while ourselves distinguishing the basic definitions. How humanistic and how Christian, then, is the Christian humanism of the fourth century?

Another essential in the search for a definition is a measure of contemporaneity. This involves something of a reconstruction, similar to the methods of biblical studies, where the emphasis has rightly been upon recapturing the original spirit of the books. Our interpretation here should achieve a sympathetic appreciation of the world views of antiquity. There exists as yet, for ex-
ample, no convincing appreciation of the Christian outlook, in all its nobility and essential limitations, that animates Jerome's *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, or the early Christian dialogues; again, scholars have not yet properly identified the tone and spirit within the many patristic letters of the Christian martyrlogies. Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* have been approached in this more sympathetic way, as being documents that have early made their way into the larger framework of world literature; but many elements need to be considered before our evaluation is wholly in keeping with the thinking of the fourth century itself, and not simply an overlay of later scholarship. Too often, for example, we steal a page from the Fathers themselves and read their works simply as mines of dogma. We should do much better to look into them for a view of the world and of man's position within it.

*Classical Humanism*

Classical humanism, in this context, describes a vision whose horizons are set by a paramount concern for the human, for the ideal of man and humanity as capable of individual and collective realization. Its hallmarks are proportion, harmony, balance, and aesthetic appreciation of the most noble elements in man (not excepting the areas where human experience impinges upon the otherworldly), all inspired by a fine sense of form molded to mate with and perfectly to express the content of the vision. This is an ideal slow to develop, and once it is achieved, both in classical Greece and later again in classical Rome, it rapidly disintegrates.

Hence the need for the well-known distinction between classical and antique. Classical refers to that whole nobility of human vision and ideals that has
ever caught the fancy of every true lover of the human. The age that succeeds upon the breakup of the classical may be, however, more properly referred to as antique. It is characterized by the retention of much of the external forms of the classical, but little if any of the spirit that gave life to that form; by a growing preoccupation with erudition versus creativity; and by a corresponding lack of political, social, and cultural sense of direction. The true flowering of the classical soul, an intense but quickly dissipating vision, considerably antedates the triumph of the Christian philosophy, with which it never did come into direct contact.

One likes to make the case that all that was best in Greek and Roman thought was channeled directly into Christianity, just as in another context one would like to envision the stream of Christian revelation running in one continuous flow from Old to New Testaments. The picture is not so simple as that. It is the antique and not the classical culture that meets with Christianity in its early years when Christianity was in a position to build a true continuity with the traditions of Rome. What Christianity takes, or even could take, of the antique past is, moreover, not the better elements. From Vergil, for example, the antique culture drew grammar and divination, but its entire literary orientation was everywhere too dependent upon compendia and commonplace, dogmatic misinformation joined with a triteness and a pervading sense of form that had already grown sterile when it no longer functioned as the form of classical harmony. This is a distinction frequently enough made, but not always borne in mind. Historically, the result is a breach of continuity: there cannot ever be that happy and all but unnoticed transition from classical humanism to Christian humanism. To ask, in fact, what would have ensued had Christian
philosophy been wedded with the ripeness of the classical glory is, in some respects, quite pointless. From another point of view, however, it is a very healthy question, for its very phrasing points up much that deserves attention in the less than ideal state of things that actually obtained.

Although it is important to be aware of this far-reaching distinction between classical and antique, one must not overstate the position. The total historical configuration that was classical humanism does not, when it begins to dissipate, simply burst like a bubble. There are elements in the dissolution that survive for a later regrouping in the Christian culture. There is thus a partial continuity, the continuity of individual elements within the larger discontinuity of an interrupted tradition. There is still access to the classical humanistic ideals, but now it involves, much as it does in the Renaissance or in modern times, a rediscovery; and the techniques for managing this rediscovery, this restoration of formal continuity with the past, were not in the fourth century so sophisticated or reliable as they are today.

Christianity was, moreover, already well on the road to evolving its own culture and philosophy. As a result, the less than accurate recovery of the older humanistic ideals proves to be something of an advantage in one sense, in that it affords the Christian development greater scope to assert those elements that are peculiarly Christian and still label the results as classical. Part of the Christian development, after all, ought to be what it can draw from the humanism of ages past. However, here the fact of discontinuity, especially when it is not clearly recognized, does invite considerable distortion. When all is said and done, one must admit that the classical spirit as a total outlook upon life had grown
so alien that only a few could lay valid claim to the sympathetic understanding of even its broader outlines, and fewer still could make a contribution toward its effective continuation.

The concepts of continuity and discontinuity, which provide a convenient polarization for studying the debt of Christian humanism in the fourth century to the classical heritage, have led to many conclusions, some of which need to be reexamined. Time being a continuum for the experience of the individual, the scholar likes to superimpose a temporal sequence upon the flux of the centuries and find evidence of continuity or discontinuity at every turn, the seeds of one thing or the Fort-leben of something else. In this the scholar deserves our thanks; but to deserve our praise, he must be thorough. There is great danger that he will wrongly lead us to accept a basically incomplete statement of the reality whose outlines he means to trace. Notwithstanding these dangers, there must be a thorough examination of the characteristic elements of humanism, and their historical developments and adaptations, before we can even consider the validity of a Christian humanism in the fourth century.

**Man**

The humanist is expected to have a coherent picture of the central position occupied by man in the scheme of things. The pagan had this in the classical past, but it was a lesser ingredient in the antique culture inherited by the fourth century. The central picture of man, in the Christian theory, was also enunciated, in Scripture and in the earliest Christian preaching. The Christian, in pursuing his ideals, might logically incorporate the humanism of the classical past.
The humanist picture is supposed to flow from the consideration of man and his nature. The Christian picture of man, on the other hand, is supposed to flow from the dignity of man envisioned as the citizen of two worlds, an ideal illustrated by the Incarnation. Thus the Christian humanist view of man must harmoniously blend two world pictures. We shall see shortly that whereas Christ and the Christian myth should, and perhaps could, have effected this amalgam, de facto it did not. The Christian paradox was potentially a definitive insight but seldom a true fusion of the two, often rival, claims upon human allegiance.

The story of fourth-century humanism is further complicated by the fact that pagan humanism looks solely to human reason for its knowledge of the philosophy of man, whereas Christian philosophy purports to draw upon a revelation as well. Thus it appears to conceal its debt to Greek philosophy, as transmitted by Cicero and others who had learned its essential modes of thought and divisions, and also to the pagan view of human dignity that is fundamental to the humanist tradition. It is shortsighted to regard all these continuing or rediscovered insights as purely the product of Christian philosophy.

Letters

The humanist turns habitually to literature and the arts as an abiding and readily accessible source for the contemplation of his ideals of human dignity and endeavor. This conservative attitude has always demanded that the models that the humanist admires should have survived several generations; here the Christian humanist draws his conservatism from the Roman sense of tradition as well as his own inherent religious ten-
dencies. The humanist tends to call these works *classics*, in the sense that having stood the test of time they can present their insights to each succeeding generation as sources universally relevant to every age. The culture of the past is thus applied to the enlightenment of the present; its ideals and criteria are canonized, invested with normative value as models toward which any contemporary humanism must necessarily aspire.

The Roman vocabulary uses the same word, *mores*, to describe both what has always obtained and what is the proper standard of any human behavior. The Christian develops this identification further in his discovery of a providential continuity in the economy of revelation whereby God wills that the truths and ideals achieved by ages past should serve as building blocks for an increasingly lofty and definitive stage of spiritual and intellectual development. This attitude is further reinforced by the Roman tradition of continuity within a literary genre, and its extension to the world of early Christian literary endeavor.

*Language*

Historically the humanist has developed a nice sense of language if only because of his involvement with the literary records of the past. It is his capacity for speech that makes the human specifically different from the beast, and the Roman word for culture in general, *humanitas*, has always represented the Roman ideal of the fullest development of those qualities that are most human in man. In this context the proper definition and use of words and language have always been regarded as a convenient and accurate index of human intelligence.

This is more than simple fascination or *jeu d’esprit*
in the true humanist who should display a keen appreciation of the need for formal equivalence between the truth that he apprehends in his mind and its eventual verbal or written expression. This is never simply a quest for elegance and polish, but, as it were, an attempt to establish a sort of inner harmony between the world of ideas and the world of verbal expression. The ensuing discipline of expression tests the depth and accuracy of his thinking (if only in that the expression involves considerable time and effort) and exerts a powerful semantic control over the likelihood of either the verbal expression or the intellectual concept ever being lightly abandoned. The one mutually complements and reinforces the other.

The Latin language is especially adapted to achieve this nicety and harmony of expression. The very forging of the Latin literary language and style, as a matter of fact, involved generations of dedicated and earnest labor in warring with the medium of language. These efforts are, to be sure, characteristic of all artistic development, but the course that the Latin literary language took was also influenced by Greek literary forms and models, the exemplaria that animated and inspired the Roman effort. The result was the fine balance and sense of language that marked the humanitas of Cicero and the artistry of expression of the poetry of the Golden Age—two precious ideals in the heritage that Rome left to the early Christian centuries.

The Latin literary tradition thus developed a special predilection for polite (that is, polished) diction; for emendatio (the painstaking elimination of every imperfection); for lucidus ordo (clearly grasped meaning supported and set off by elegant diction); for callida iunctura (effective and ingenious ordering and arrange-
ment of words to enhance their basic functions and nuance). This is a noble tradition that, once proclaimed, never really dies. The techniques forged by the need for expression remained available, like many other forms that have outlived their basic inspiration, for emulation by later generations of Latin writers who, though lacking the literary vision and potential of the Golden Age, found the ideal at least partially achievable in their careful attention to the smaller details of composition.

The structure of the Latin literary language is such that it can express infinitely more in the way of subtle antithesis through its flexible word order than, for example, can modern English. Contrasting words like one-many, you-me, up-down, can, in the more flexible structure of the Latin sentence, be set side by side or otherwise stressed and contrasted. The Christian vocabulary is by its very nature full of such contrasted themes: paradox that life is death, or death life. The Latin Christian authors exploit this potential to the full.

Rediscovery

Humanism can involve something of a rediscovery, in the Renaissance sense of the word, even where we would not look for it as essential. This accounts for much of its vitality. Even in classical Roman times this element was never wholly lacking (cf. Horace’s exemplaria Graeca), and in the fourth century it is much in evidence. It implies essentially two things: enough continuity with the humanist tradition to create a sympathetic atmosphere, and enough discontinuity to make the realization of the humanist insights a more or less new discovery for that age, thereby providing for de-
velopment and change within areas that would otherwise have been too rigidly controlled by the conservative force of tradition.

There is no compelling reason why the Christian faith and the Christian philosophy should not have developed a humanism that successfully emulated and continued the best elements of the classical past, despite the existence of differences in emphasis within the Christian humanist's attitude toward man, the classical past, letters and language, and in the degree of conscious rediscovery that he was able and willing to aspire to. It is disappointing to note that Christian humanism fails to achieve its fullest potential in all these respects; yet it is gratifying to observe how aware Christian thinkers had become to at least some of these considerations.

**The Christian Myth**

The philosophy that animates the Christian synthesis involves continuity with the humanistic culture of the past. Although it is true that Christian thinkers very clearly began turning to the philosophies of Greece and Rome for models along which to develop the Christian message, it is also true that not all these philosophies were humanistic.

Still, the Christian world picture or the Christian myth (that is, those elements in Christian thinking and revelation that correspond to *mythos* in antiquity) is characterized primarily by a radical unity and total depth. First of all, the Christian philosophy effectively subsumes the fundamentals of Greek and Roman philosophy: the vision of Plato, a world of pure and perfect existences whose shadows only are what we encounter in the life of the senses; the logical necessity of what was recalled of the Aristotelian system; the contemplative
charm of Neo-Platonic gradations to divinity; the individual and personal imperatives of an afterlife, an ideal proposed and promoted by the mystery religions; and the Stoic gospel as a moral imperative. All these strains eventually find their place in the vision of a God who is both creator and object of love and guarantee of the soul’s individual immortality.

The Christian synthesis also bridged a deeper gap. Roman religion had sought primarily to achieve and maintain the pax deorum by a ritualized observance of all the externals of the divine cult, devoid of individual moral commitment to the Olympian divinities or even to the native Roman deities. There was no necessary connection between the gods’ blessing upon the Roman state and the private morality of its citizens. In equating the two as equally imperative elements of religious observance, the Christian philosophy achieved a phenomenon unique in antiquity and a source of interior strength.

The person of Jesus Christ serves as key to this remarkable accomplishment. As the embodiment of the Christian mythos, he combines heaven and earth, divinity and humanity. At the same time, he exists as the Person Christ and the Mystical Christ, the whole body of the Christian Church who believe in his Gospel and are raised by his grace to a higher, supernatural level of existence on condition of their being one with him. In a single stroke Christianity might thus answer all the enigmas that Greek and Roman mythos might appear to raise: it might assert the value and dignity of man and still safeguard the prerogatives of divinity; it might settle the divergent claims of heros and theos, while asserting the unity of mankind, the purpose of human existence in harmony with a divine will, free will and foreknowledge in God—Christ as all in all.
Whereas the ancient humanisms had tended to look upon man as the measure of all things, this was not a view with which Christianity was particularly sympathetic. Logically it might well have been, for humanity was given new status through the advent of the novus Adam, the new man who incorporated heaven and earth in the unified expression of the human dilemma, by virtue of which he could truly be called the measure of all things. This conception could have been called Christian humanism from one point of view: the philosophy developed about the concept of the man, Christ. It is not, however, what Christian humanism should have come to mean, and at all events it certainly does not characterize the thought of the fourth century, when the very word humanity, humanitas, tended to express one extreme of a polarization, divinitas being the other extreme, and thereby to become a pejorative concept rather than the Roman term for culture. By the fourth century, the role of man as the measure of all things, although consistent with the basic principles of the Christian mythos, had already suffered considerable distortion.

Religious Continuity

For the more obvious continuities within the religious philosophy of antique Rome we can look to much of the form, the liturgical ritual and dignity (gravitas) that marked Roman religion: the liturgical season and its adaptations of the pagan vegetal cycle and hero cults; the concept of an initiate body of elect within the larger mass of lesser mortals; the derivation of personal standards of morality from an ethical philosophy based on an idealized yet coherent conception of the nature of man; even the mysteries and elements of superstition that continued to haunt the private observances of town
and countryside; finally, the burgeoning worship of the saints, the fragmentation or bureaucratization, if you will, of the essential purity and all-efficacy of the divine power. All this flows quite naturally from the Roman spirit and makes a profound impact upon the content and form of Christian literature. To its Roman antecedents the early church also owed its pervasive feeling for order and law; the hierarchically organized structure of its government; its sense of mission as lawgiver to the nations; its conviction of manifest destiny; and its presumption that the text of Scripture has a fuller and secret meaning.

The authority of Sacred Scripture, moreover, is only partly the result of the dogma of divine revelation, for it proceeds from a way of seeing things that is congenial to the Roman mentality, that is, the absolute authority of the written word that has survived the centuries. An equal respect is accorded to Vergil and Plato and to whatever survives from antiquity, and this is a tendency that the Fathers and the early Middle Ages confirmed and carried several steps further. This attitude was further developed by the cult of erudition rather than originality.

Yet this is not a surprising development before the advent of widespread literacy and before printing had robbed the word of much of its inherent mystique, a culture where *auctor* as a concept always has overtones of authority. Neither must we be surprised to note that, in keeping with the Roman mentality, there is always a strong interaction between form and content. These elements pass almost unconsciously into the Christian ambience and are subordinated to the Christian's sense of the otherworldly, which in itself accounts for the fact that Christianity did not subsume all these divergent strains with perfect harmony.
Tradition, one of the most cherished Roman traits, had certainly not been lost in the patristic era. Men like Tertullian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine were thoroughly in sympathy with the grandeur handed down authoritatively by Rome. This conservative tendency took the form of holding fast to a depositum fidei, revealed faith entrusted to the keeping of the Church by Christ himself. Much of the inherent content of this depositum—dogmas such as primacy, Incarnation, Trinity, predestination, grace—were slow to develop, in times free from persecution or as a reaction against the gropings of heresy.

Heresy is, of course, essentially a pejorative word, but here it is a concept that needs to be evaluated in the light of its own times. In these early centuries it is more properly understood as a tentative expression of Christian philosophy. It thus becomes one of the polarities of a Christian truth, at first uncritically believed by the simple and then upon reflection seen to contain some obvious inconsistencies. It provokes a reaction, and the resultant synthesis emerges as the authoritative statement of the Christian philosophy or, at a later date, as dogmatic truth. Heresy in these later years becomes heresy only after it has lost its debate with what emerges as orthodoxy. At first it appears to have an equal claim to win out as the truth. It is well to stress this point for the insight it provides into the Christian attitude.

Christian intolerance of pagan opinion is characteristic of a society that has either a conviction of the correctness of its official position or a sense of such imperative and categorical reaction against contamination from any source external to itself that not even the admittedly positive contributions of such an outside culture, not even those elements that would have been most
advantageously included in the Christian synthesis, dare be tolerated. This intransigent position had characterized the writings of those of the early Fathers who lacked the education to appreciate it, and in the fourth century this fear of subtle contamination was still very much in evidence. The resulting intolerance is certainly not humanistic, especially when the opposing views are founded upon a philosophy that is dictated by the highest traditions of classical culture, or when, as in the case of many of Jerome's adversaries, they are a corrective reaction against what is seen as an improper development in the Christian philosophy itself. This is not to say that heresy is good or Christian dogma bad, but that the tension between the two forces in the fourth century needs to be viewed in a more sympathetic light.

**Faith and Revelation**

The basic position of the Christian philosophy is generally characterized as faith, *fides*, a concept that has been subjected to considerable scrutiny and definition in the Christian theology. For present purposes, we need note only one point: the faith of the humanist should be in *humanitas*, as it was in classical times, whereas the Christian faith is faith in God or Christ.

Now, this distinction does not cut off the Christian philosophy from all claim to insight into, and expression of, true humanism. Faith can be (and early is) a powerful stimulus to philosophy, for it opens the way to the contemplation of elements in human nature that otherwise never would have been appreciated. In the great Church Fathers one feels instinctively that this is the case. Yet here, too, Christian faith learned to focus
more on the wonders of man’s role in the world than to consider his eternal goals so transcendent an objective as to monopolize all his human energies.

The enthusiastic and inspired element of faith has always been part of the Christian tradition. Like inspiration, however, the element of faith soon loses much of its personal immediacy and becomes largely a preamble to acceptance of infallible truth. It was to some measure the failure, by the fourth century, of the Christian philosophy to provide adequate dialectic expression and foundation for the truths it proposed to the faithful that prompted it to have recourse simply to the “rule of faith,” that is, the dogmatic assertion of a fact, and to revert to mysterion, that is, an article of faith believed to be true but still incapable of positive demonstration because of the weakness of human reason.

This is a position where Christianity had stood once before and to which it would again return. There was a more positive sense of mysterion as impetus to personal faith and commitment in the earlier years. The manifest errors of the second-century apologists and the positions taken by the third-century philosophers, fluctuating within the polarities of spirit-flesh and idealism-materialism, eventually give rise to the Christian solution of negative approaches: the Christian philosophy was content to demonstrate that truths were not inherently contradictory or repugnant to human reason.

Whether one chooses to see it as an advantage or hindrance in the long run, the fact that Christianity does claim to draw upon an absolute source of authority, and hence credibility, for its philosophy is certainly the most ponderable element of discontinuity with the past. The proud conviction of divine revelation, a deposit of truths that impinge upon the world of human experience from without and bear the clear stamp of credibility by virtue
of their being vouched for by God himself, is a new and heady ingredient. It made the Christians an enthusiastic church of martyrs and evangelists. In time, however, it too came to function as material for the workings of the philosophic mind, once the passage of years had eliminated the need for compelling demonstration of the concept as a basis for the unfolding of the Christian philosophy. Yet even apart from the Christian's need to retain his early enthusiasm, the Incarnation made serious demands upon the philosophical acumen of early Christianity.

The duality of sources presents a real problem. True humanism, the purist might well argue, should be restricted to the use of purely natural resources. Although it was argued that the supernatural source of information could yield valuable insights into the human situation and destiny, eventually the formal differences between the two approaches betrayed the attempt at fusion.

Fundamentally, and in actual fact, the Fathers did not mean to urge too great a distinction between the reliability of those truths that came via divine revelation and those that came via the light of natural reason. There was, they presumed, a continuum in the economy of salvation that provided for the sure progression of what was known, of old, by light of human reason into what came ultimately from the same source, God, by a uniquely different and more credible way. More credible, that is, not in terms of its ultimate origins but in terms of its having taken a more direct route, less susceptible to the vagaries of human misinterpretation. By the fourth century, moreover, Christianity had already begun to develop its own ambience. So much theologizing had already been done upon the divinely guaranteed data of revelation that it was not always possible to distinguish between what was known origi-
nally via the unaided light of human reason and what had come through the medium of revelation. Much of what had indeed come from reason alone, but had taken a rather circuitous route, was made to flow instead from the sources of revelation as if it were a message straight from God, whereas in fact it had developed from the continuity with the classical past, not always classically remembered, and often in fact strangely distorted. Even where it was recognized and understood, the pagan classical heritage could not be simply taken over or even simply baptized. It would have seemed that the Incarnation had been to no avail if the humanistic philosophy inherent in Christianity had been too easily and too simply recast in classical terms. Even when, as in the case of Ambrose's *De Officiis*, the classical pagan philosophy does make its way into the patristic soul, the specifically Christian differences are generally stressed to the disadvantage of the pagan, which is to say that the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude are first of all baptized into their Christianized counterparts and then almost immediately relegated to a position of lesser importance than that enjoyed by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. These virtues, in their turn, undergo a curious development, progressing from the virtues imposed by a sort of necessity upon the downtrodden classes who first embraced the Gospel to a position in which they are, so to speak, virtues only by analogy. It is the sheer gratuity of the Christian-infused virtues that is stressed. They come essentially as a free gift from God and are not the product of any human striving. Still, no purely human act is meritorious, in the supernatural order, without the foundation laid by these virtues in the soul of the elect.

The doctrine of grace, as it takes on more precise
form, lent further impetus to the development of an otherworldly orientation. It helped to set the unfortunate polarity of nature-grace, thereby asserting that nature is of itself evil and that its only salvation lies in its being elevated to the higher order of grace. This point of view tended to absolve the human agent of some human effort and further blunted his sensitivity to the humanistic culture. The search was now for the security of the supernatural and the comfort of dogma, in place of the challenge of using the world and living the Christian paradox by honoring the claims of both nature and grace. The rapid emergence of dogma from the humanitas of philosophy is regrettable, if only because dogma is of its very nature more intransigent and less open to religious inspiration, whereas a true Christian humanism needs to promote largely the opposite objectives.

What theology does in essence is to press for a science, that is, rigorous dogmatic theology. This involves an abuse of the language of Scripture, reducing the Bible's inspiration to the more sterile guarantee of inerrancy, and thus tending to cloud the appreciation of the Bible as literature. Words in theology must taken on technical force, and the expression of high religious enthusiasm hardens into a search for literal meaning so that the terms can function as the precise medium of revelation. Frequently this process involves reading something into the text. There are subtle changes in important words, where the meaning appears to be the same, in connotation, bearing, and intent, whereas in fact it has undergone considerable modification in order to function as the vehicle of scientific argument.

This process of development and adaptation is seen as a providential one, with God working through the very imperfections of his chosen human instruments. This conviction does much to explain why theology, in its
search for precise demonstration of dogma, does not always hold fast to the obvious and literal meaning of words. Arguments frequently can be supported by allegory, adapted senses, typology, even by outright error in translation. From the humanistic point of view this is an abuse of language, and it invites a further abuse.

**Gnosis**

Side by side with the development of dogma we note the rise of that occultist tendency to find the Gospel still speaking its mysteries, no longer in terms of the original religious challenge and vision, or, again, in terms of what had formerly served as the raw material for dogmatic theology, but as an epiphenomenon, a growth upon the letter that would assure the occultist satisfaction of the need to be transcendentally reassured.²

**Gnosis** is a term applied to a group of self-styled elite within the Christian religion, although it had its pagan antecedents and counterparts. It has close ties with Neo-Platonism and the concept of knowledge through purification (the Essenes of the Dead Sea are a further analogue). As a doctrine it was gradually abandoned after the third century, when dogma had become more defined and there was less scope for writing one's own bill as a Christian. As an ascetic principle, characteristic of that group in every age to whom the Spirit really speaks, it is as abiding a factor within Christianity as is the Creed and the unshakable authority of the Roman Pontiff.

This urgency to exploit the letter of the text for other than its obvious meaning was largely the result of changes in the Christian structure itself. There had been considerable flux in the first centuries of Christian thinking, and Harnack is not far wrong in asserting that the
Church has done well to reread her past in order to discover a unified development, at least in retrospect, where there had been precious little of it in actual fact. But now in place of flux and enthusiasm and inspiration, we have the harder stuff of dogma. Revelation had closed with the death of Saint John the Apostle, and all new thinking had to make explicit that which was already implicit in the sources of revealed truth. This framework imposed upon the development of Christian philosophy proved to be a wonderful source of unity and coherence. But it also made it difficult to rediscover the faith and enthusiasm inherent in Christianity by the truly human sense, that is, by going back in time to encounter this new phenomenon in all its original force and coming to grips with its true religious message. Much of the early spirit had not been adapted and transformed, and there were other important objectives to be pursued in theology.

Still, this fascination with the letter pursues the letter in a peculiarly nonhumanistic manner and for nonhumanistic purposes. We should feel today that if the Gospel has a message for us it must be as a document of high religious fervor, in keeping with the proper human use of language. When this sensus obvius is forced into terminus technicus or a "fuller sense," other even less legitimate purposes are pursued. Then it is inerrancy that speaks, a preoccupation that is nonhumanistic simply because it is superhumanistic. And, as every true humanist might justly fear, the nonhumanistic rapidly develops into inhumanism, just as the superhumanistic will generally turn out to be antihumanism.

There is, moreover, a difference with respect to the methodology of ages past. The basic dilemma of human existence was not customarily solved in the classical pagan myths and their literary development in tragedy.
It was, rather, sympathetically stated, and always retained something of its inherent mystery. The dogmatic development of Christianity, on the other hand, embarked upon a somewhat different route. It gleaned elements of dialectic reasoning from the *mythos* of Scripture, through a process that does not always assure the survival of the religious inspiration of the sacred text, too often sacrificing enthusiasm for what proved to be merely logical afterthought or grammatical superstructure. This overrefinement resulted from confusing the literary genres of the sources and from reducing the utterances of the religious spirit to unencumbered statements of dogma. Christianity needed to be disabused of the notion that it could solve the fundamental problems of human existence other than in principle and for the few. The process was long and painful.

Classical humanism had, moreover, an aesthetic and anthropocentric view of man, whereas Christian humanism, even in its fullest flower, had a considerable mistrust of any real involvement with aesthetics as a primary ingredient of its world view. Aesthesis was too readily identified with decadence in the Roman culture of the early Christian centuries. This regrettable fact is, perhaps, one of the clearest marks of discontinuity between the Christian and the classical ideals; and it is owing, not to any shortcomings in the Christian Gospel, but largely to the degeneration of true classicism into the pagan culture encountered by Christianity.

The Christian ideal does suffer by comparison with the pagan classical ideal, in that it does not easily achieve either the balance or the awareness of human limitation—in a word, the thoroughgoing humanism we have come to associate with the full flower of the classical pagan ideal. It was a very long time before the Christian life fused with the pagan form to achieve a
true appreciation of man's place in the universe, and even then this picture was quickly lost. Christianity is a ferment, and one hard to assimilate because it feeds upon, and thus destroys, much of what is really in its own best interests to preserve and develop. All of this simply illustrates the fact that theology and humanism are not universally compatible, and that certitude from God is too overpowering a credential.

Now, the element of religion as an ingredient of the humanistic philosophy might, as we have seen, be seriously challenged. The classical ideal must be seen as flowing from a consideration of human nature. Faith becomes compatible with human experience simply because the Christian does not always, in practice, reflect on the distinctions. In theory, however, there is always a potential problem: the individual will focus alternately upon one or the other polarity.

**Otherworldly**

The most serious shortcoming of Christian humanism proved to be the growing preoccupation with the otherworldly. The afterlife became a preponderant element of the Christian's striving. *Natalicia*, birthday, became in fact the day of birth into heaven, not into earth. This same tendency is evident in other words. The shift in meaning of *humanitas* has already been noted, but one might also note how meekness and *humilitas* became objects of human effort instead of qualities to be avoided; how self-denial became more essential a virtue than temperate enjoyment; and how the paradox was exploited that true life is seeming death. In a word, the chief theoretical claim of the Incarnation was to have produced the *novus Adam*, to have harmonized *Logos* and *homo*, the human and the divine in human destiny. Soon the
divine emerges as the preponderant concern: it is no longer a question of how manlike God has become, but rather how godlike man must become.

In the fourth century this preoccupation with the otherworldly had more than theoretical and philosophical consequences. Christian religious enthusiasm had from the very beginning expressed itself in terms of extreme dedication to the ideals of the Gospel. Persecution and martyrdom, or imprisonment in the name of Christ, characterized the careers and ambitions of the Christians of the first centuries. The fourth century, however, introduced a new heroic ideal for the Christian who really meant to live up to his faith. With the cessation of persecution and the consequent removal of an ever-present threat to life and freedom of expression, the Christian seems to have turned to a new and self-imposed challenge to preserve and constantly renew on a personal level the imminent urgency of the Gospel imperatives. The tendency had already expressed itself in terms of the chiliast enthusiasm, which is to be found as early as Saint Paul, the conviction that the second coming of Christ was near at hand. By the fourth century this hope for the imminent Parousia had dropped from focus, only to be replaced by a highly developed sense of *askesis*, not directed toward philosophical experience, but simply as a mark of the true Christian.

*Askesis* itself is not new. There had long been a doctrine of catharsis, a self-refinement for the contemplative soul, but the Gospel provided an added impetus. Its overenthusiastic extension to the world at large involved painful adjustment. The controversies and tensions thus created will require some later discussion.

The Christian is, after all, a citizen of two worlds, a man of two cities, in the classical formulation of Augustine. His roots lie ultimately in both sources. On the one hand he has the mythology of the past with its human-
izing (rather than anthropomorphizing) creation of a pantheon of deities who are really the larger editions of man himself; on the other hand he has a heritage of heaven after earth. The pagan religious ideal had sought to focus attention upon the individual’s fullest development of his inherent human potential. The Christian was slow to appreciate or accept this essentially ennobling view of human nature and to enlist it in the service of his own mythos. His world view too soon became an otherworld view. The Christian on the road toward Christian humanism needed, despite his calling to an afterlife, ideally, to make use of the world and even of the lustful and rebellious flesh itself before he could achieve his goal as Christian. He needed to be human before he could be truly Christian, and to be a Christian man before he could aspire to become a saint. For centuries this ideal was neither fully realized nor resolutely pursued.

When the proper balance in objectives was finally achieved, it came about, paradoxically enough, because of a change in focus. Christianity began eventually to function less as religious impulse than as atmosphere or backdrop. Much of what the Christian religion appeared to incorporate turned out, after the cooling effect of three centuries, to be merely a trend name for things that happened in a world become Christian. Much of what savored of the Christian world view was a Christian world view turned Establishment, with vested interests of its own. As such, it was ripe for a total reassessment of a heritage that it had failed to recognize in its infancy. It required the slow gestation of centuries to give birth to the new humanism as a proper harmony of the Christian philosophies of world and afterworld. The full achievement of this happy coalescence was not simply the product of the fourth Christian century; and one might well criticize the fourth century for failing to
achieve what it was uniquely qualified to achieve, for having let slip an opportunity that was destined never again to appear, or at least not for many centuries.

The degree of Christian humanism achieved by the fourth century is still a true and genuine humanism. Our scholarly judgment tends to single out mostly its shortcomings if we fail to consider that Christianity was building upon the antique rather than the classical heritage of ages past. We are in a position today to realize the failings more acutely because we can compare the acme of classical pagan humanism with what in many respects is only the earliest stage of the Christian humanism that later flowered in the Renaissance. Although our judgment is thus, in many respects, better founded than the less critical awe displayed by the Middle Ages for Patristic humanism, we must not swing too enthusiastically to the opposite extreme.

Christianity and Classics

The first Christian centuries had been marked by two different and not always consistent attitudes toward the pagan classical heritage in its literary form. Strong and sympathetic support came from those of the Fathers who were educated in the rhetorical and literary tradition of antiquity, appreciated the possible continuity between Christianity and its classical antecedents, and recognized the need to use pagan philosophy as a tool in the evolution of the Christian view of the world. Many others, conversely were more aware of the failings of contemporary pagan classicism (while they were unable to recover the true classical humanism), of the need for a reaction against persecution, and of the precedence of otherworldly claims upon Christian allegiance.
The major representatives of these two opposing attitudes are too familiar to require any discussion here. One should, however, note that a balanced judgment on these matters is all but impossible. If the scholar searches, he can draw up a surprisingly full documentation for either position, often within the oeuvre of one and the same Father. Even those who most mistrusted pagan learning felt the need to draw upon its basic forms of expression.

There are a good many studies, general and specific, that explore the patristic relationship with the classics. Hagendahl, for example, has, most recently, compiled a listing of Saint Augustine's indebtedness to the pagan authors, and the subject is amply treated in the indexes of every scholarly edition of the patristic writings. But merely listing and identifying the sources is not enough. The simple fact of quotation does not indicate the attitude with which the Fathers regarded their classical heritage. The fact that we call these works classics today does not mean that the Fathers looked upon them as classics in anything like the Renaissance or modern sense. That would have been a difficult perspective to achieve, particularly in the face of prejudices that all tended to a quite opposite evaluation. The involvement with pagan philosophy, to which infant Christianity turned for methodology and a frame of reference, was not really humanistic. What was needed was the conversion of a humanist or the thoroughgoing classical training of a sympathetically minded Christian.

The opposition to the classics that appears to some of the Fathers is characterized by mistrust and misinformation. Those Fathers who have any valid claim to represent the Christianized humanism of classical times stand at best several times removed from the true mentality of the works they meant to build upon. We must never over-
look the havoc wrought by discontinuity in this respect. The reconstruction of the classical ideal, even where openly and enthusiastically attempted, was curiously incomplete: inadequate in principle, subjective, biased, it sought demonstration and proof for the validity of something characteristically Christian that was supposedly founded upon its antecedents in the classical past, whereas it was, in fact, quite different in identity and spirit.

This dual stream influenced the fourth century as well, where the issue was further complicated by the predominance of otherworldly orientations. But another factor that needs to be considered is the ad hoc and practical character of much patristic writing, which was thus often deprived of those classical humanistic ideals so essential to the literature of power as opposed to the literature of knowledge: the gratuitous development of an ideal theme as sufficient in itself to motivate and justify the artistic expression. We are dealing too much with the literature of knowledge or an attempted literature of power too hastily composed.\(^{13}\)

The influence of noble pagan thought was obvious in every century, and particularly in the fourth. Early scholarship, aware of these trends, described the resultant product as pagan form and Christian content. Today we are more likely to recognize a higher degree of continuity within the content as well. There is thus a survival and contamination in genre as well as in the manner of expression.

**Patristic Literature**

The literary genres of early Christian writings have not received the same attention that has been accorded to biblical exegesis. The Roman had, after all, a sense
of form unique in the history of literature: he knew what was the proper vehicle for history, epic, satire, love poetry, a letter of consolation, or a panegyric. His sense of form led him to realize his creative inspiration only within the framework of a well-established genre or style. Painstaking emulation of one’s predecessors was considered grounds for praise and recognition; thus the Roman literary mentality was not prepared to accept novelty. Its peculiar literary genius was more sympathetic to a sense of developing tradition within the well-marked limits of a specific genre.

It would be strange indeed if the Roman Church Fathers did not exhibit a similar awareness. Augustine’s Confessions are, seen in this continuity, a sort of meditative soliloquy. The City of God, which embodies the first attempt at a Christian philosophy of history, is, in other respects, a potpourri in the Roman tradition of the prose medley. Its historical and literary sources may or may not be manifold, but the style and form exhibit the later Latin preoccupation with anthologizing and excerpting of earlier authors. Jerome’s Letters might have sprung from the pages of Quintilian as model developments of the stock rhetorical forms and styles: so much so, in fact, that scholars seriously doubt whether some of them were not written without any application to a real situation, as a jeu d’esprit on the part of that most classically learned of all the Christian authors, who languished for the rhetorical exercises of his youth. His Treatise against Jovinian is a fine specimen of the Roman style of exempla, anecdotes adduced as illustration of a thesis—which in Jerome’s case is simply that women are no good. The fact that Jerome, in this context, appears to confuse illustration with proof is evidence, not of his having departed from the genre of exempla, but rather of the theological shallowness of many patristic po-
lemics. The Scripture commentary develops after Origen on the lines of the standard *explication de texte*, such a natural if not always congenial instructional methodology that it would be strange indeed if any epoch in the history of education has ever been wholly without it. The sermon, or homily, also a written composition, has manifold antecedents: the philosophic essay, the diatribe, the rhetorical declamation, like which it often displays more brilliance than concern for evoking, in Bossuet's phrase, "the gift of tears"—that is, conviction and conversion in the listener.

There is growing awareness among the students of the Patristic Age of these continuities between Christian and pagan Roman literary endeavor. We are concerned here with the non-Christian character of much that looks like Christian writing, those elements of continuity with the Roman tradition that extend more to matters of detail and content.

Chief among these is the Roman development of the tradition of *topoi*, or literary commonplaces, stock themes that run throughout the history of literature. Unlike our modern age, antiquity attached no stigma to the employment of *topoi*. It was, in fact, a matter of pride to exploit them in novel ways. The literary history of individual commonplaces and their development well into the Middle Ages is a rewarding study. In a more general way, an awareness of these tendencies must enhance the appreciation of any individual patristic author. We shall see that this is particularly true of Jerome, largely perhaps because of his excessive involvement with mere words.

Christian patristic scholarship on this subject has been curiously hampered by a naïve unwillingness to assume that the Fathers were actually using rhetorical and stylistic commonplaces, as if these were somehow at variance
with truthfulness and, as such, outside the arsenal of patristic expression. When Prudentius says he “saw these very things himself,” it was immediately believed that he had done so; when Jerome alludes to the vices of his earlier years, he is taken at face value. When the Christian writer belabors his unworthiness or his incapacity for artistic expression, it passes for genuine humility. When he asks God to aid his endeavors, it is made to sound like true prayer rather than a Christianization of the pagan invocation to the Muses.

Not only did the Fathers employ a considerable number of topos that echo the Roman tradition; Christian literature itself soon evolved a well-stocked repertory of Christianized topos of its own. This applies not only to the obvious substitution of Christian elements for pagan within the same context (like the invocation to God or the Saints instead of the Muses) or to areas where the words sound Christian to us because we are more familiar with them as classical commonplaces (for example, protestations of unworthiness—humilitas), but also to many stock themes that are presumed to be the proper expression of the sentiments of a good Christian. This makes for difficulties in interpretation and requires a balanced judgment in assessing the true bearing of a patristic expression. Much of the Christian disparagement of classical antiquity is not a matter of genuine conviction: it is conventional. Often, moreover, the very form of expression belies the content. One need only work his way through the first book of Augustine’s Confessions to appreciate this striking divergence between content (disparagement of classical literature) and the vehicle of its expression, which is Roman and classical, and jubilantly so. There is a longstanding Roman tradition, of course, for precisely this convention: see, for example, Horace’s disclaimers to epic expertise in
Scriberis Vario (Odes 1.6), or in the opening lines of Satires 2.1.

In a conservatively oriented and derivative literature such as the Latin patristic writings, content is often largely determined by borrowed forms. Continuity in traditional genres and individual commonplace made it a point of honor to emulate, within a traditional framework, the established works of those who were acknowledged masters in that field. The older catchphrase "pagan form and Christian content" is still partially correct, because the Christian author had a different message from that of pagan literature; but the form, too, must be seen as exerting a kind of mortmain upon the content, not only in its phrasing, but often in essential elements of its point of view.

The very fact that patristic literature looked to earlier classical forms as a model and was aware of some continuity already precludes, at least in part, the full accomplishment of one cherished ideal of the true humanist. The patristic writer might indeed claim to be enlisting the past as the model for the present; but his horizons had grown too narrow. Continuity was largely restricted to form and the influences of form upon content. The true dimensions of the classical vision, which we might hope the patristic age could have recaptured, always hover beyond its grasp.

Christianity and Latin

The Latin literary language, as we have seen, is a facile tool for the humanist, the vehicle for the expression of Roman humanitas and fashioned for this purpose. As the form determining the totality of structure and vision within pagan classicism, it soon dissipated; but many elements survived, reinforced by the rhetorical
bent of later education and its preoccupation with gathering _bons mots_ from the past. These elements provided rich material for the Christian who was eager to apply even the most rudimentary humanism in language to the expression of his Christian faith.

Unfortunately, it is not always the best elements that survived. One of the most obvious of the inherited techniques is antithesis; inherent in any language, it is a more-developed stylistic element in the flexible word order of the Latin sentence. Latin thus fitted in providentially well with Christian paradoxes and polarities, to whose expression it lent such a ready support that the results, in the hands of men who lacked the fullness of classical form and harmony, were an exaggerated attention to elaborate antithesis as a normal pattern for developing their thought. Such a stylistic imbalance soon reduced the impact of the paradoxical. Like much of the earlier pagan conceits of style, the striking became commonplace.

In terms of the Christian Gospel itself, there was a more serious consequence: an overemphasis on the isolation, and eventually the mutual exclusivity, of the two terms in the polarities of earth-heaven and flesh-spirit, rather than the promotion of their happy coalescence as contributing elements to one harmonious view of man in God’s world. This was, after all, the greatest potential contribution of the Incarnation, the theoretical fusion of Alpha and Omega. It would be naïve to blame the Latin language for this failure of the Christian potential; yet, in the developing Christian literature the ready use of these stylistic elements within the Latin tradition accentuated the process.

In this connection we must mention the phenomenon of vocabulary shift, a subtle tendency that may escape the notice of even the observant student of comparative
cultures and institutions—largely by reasons of its slowness and of the easily overlooked difficulty of mastering any idiom other than one's native tongue. One recognizable process is that by which originally undifferentiated words assume a new range of technical meaning. Examples abound in the Christianized glossary: presbyter, grace, baptize, martyr, pope—all become realities of a new order. Jerome contributed to the formation of more than 350 words; Lactantius and Tertullian provided many more. Many new words were required, and there were many new sources on which to draw: the Hebrew Old Testament, the Greek Koine, the specialized vocabulary of the New Testament. There were also many new concepts that still developed within the protective shell of the older words. **Humilitas**, for example, has already been discussed, as has **humanitas**. The nomenclature of the virtues might remain externally the same, but Christian self-control or continence does not correspond exactly with the pagan concept of an inner harmony with the ideal.

A more subtle shift lies in the connotative overtones that develop for many words, eventually forming an obstacle against the recovery of classical humanism and its outlook. These words are to be found everywhere in the Christian writings: **martyr**, **natura**, **saeculum**, **anima**, **mors**, **castitas**, **virgo**. It is only the connotative overtones that change, and thus the bridge with the antique past appears to be continuous, whereas it is in fact a ghost over broken ruins. The Christian conception of the other-world is largely responsible for this shift, and it is a natural phenomenon and thus to be anticipated. Failure to recognize these facts can weaken the reliability of later judgment on the accomplishments, purposes, and **humanitas** of the patristic era.
Jerome

Christianity had reached this stage in realizing its potential as a humanistic culture by the fourth century. With the cessation of persecution, Christian thinkers were in a position to address themselves to problems other than those of survival. The fourth century is also characterized by a significant measure of discontinuity with the classical past, as we have seen, so that any real sense of appreciation for that era was not largely a matter of rediscovery. It was a time when champions were needed, men whose grasp of Christianity was sympathetic to humanism, who were acquainted with the classical heritage and able to understand with much the same eyes and ears as did the audience for which the mature products of classicism were first enunciated.

Now there were, in fact, men of this caliber in the fourth century in the Latin West. Traditionally we number Augustine, Ambrose, Lactantius, and Jerome among the greatest of the Western Church Fathers. Here we shall consider only one individual Christian humanist who, among fourth-century Christian writers, far out-ranks all others in his grasp of Roman and Greek antiquities. His peculiar frame of mind made him particularly conscious of his debt to classical culture yet aware of those specifically Christian elements that needed to be safeguarded in any confrontation with the heritage of ages past. This man is Saint Jerome.

Jerome has been presented as a man whose avowed mission it was to fuse all the best elements of both his worlds into the synthesis of Christian humanism. This traditional evaluation bears some sympathetic review. It is of course to be expected that his humanism would necessarily labor under the disadvantages of his time, when pagan humanism was neither well recalled nor yet
fully rediscovered in a Christian setting, and the Christian element itself had begun to suffer from improper definition of its ideal, citizenship in two worlds.

Jerome's reputation is, moreover, essentially a product of the Middle Ages, whose judgment on the Church Fathers we have largely inherited and long tended simply to preserve. The medieval judgment on Jerome was based on much imprecise information and colored by the medieval community of purpose with the objectives of Jerome's own career. We need to reexamine particularly those areas in which Jerome was most highly honored and esteemed: his erudition, his Vulgate translation of Scripture, his commentaries, his skill in using words, and his orthodox championing of the cause of asceticism.

The shortcomings of erudition as a claim to literary fame could hardly be appreciated in an era like the Middle Ages, which were themselves more given over to erudition than to creative originality. In their way, they overvalued Jerome's actual acquaintance with the classical past. The unquestioned accomplishment of the Vulgate translation could too easily obscure the equally unquestioned weakness of much of Jerome's commentary and the tendentious intrusion of Jerome's own personal thinking into what he sets forth as the fuller meaning of the sacred text. The evaluation is, finally, largely a product of monkish ideals. Only the clergy were in a position to read and understand much of his work, and their enthusiastic appreciation of, and community with, his objectives have endowed his memory with a position of precedence, from which any subsequent evaluation has first of all to dislodge him before it can arrive at an objective point of view. In spite of detailed modern study of many of the points upon which Jerome's reputation rests, the essentials of the medieval attitude have not
been really touched, and scholars have not yet embarked upon a full-scale reevaluation. The attitudes inherited from the Middle Ages, though ultimately based on a set of judgments no longer entirely supportable, have nonetheless influenced our contemporary attitudes. When the Renaissance took up the subject of Saint Jerome, it had already inherited the traditional judgment; Renaissance writers took delight in the words Jerome had bequeathed them and were not concerned to discover how superficial much of his familiarity with the classical ideals might be. They were concerned with the excitement of rediscovery of what they presumed him to have known, and they were not put off by the strange bias of much of what passes for orthodox Christianity in Jerome.

One curious and significant fact soon begins to emerge. The student of Jerome who takes pains to rediscover the venerable doctor in the light of the fourth century inevitably becomes aware of his many shortcomings. Because Jerome was no proponent of the golden mean, his strong points each developed a contrary failing. The very elements in his career and makeup that enabled him to see the challenge and urgency of his ultimate objectives were precisely what hindered him from bringing his work to a successful conclusion. This statement is more far-reaching in application than might appear. It affects not only such obvious considerations as tendentious scriptural exegesis and overenthusiastic spiritual advice, but also his very methodology and direction. In this connection there are many individual points to be briefly considered.

**Erudition and Rhetoric**

Jerome’s manifest acquaintance with, and appreciation for, Roman literature and philosophy would appear
to be an obvious claim to humanism. His erudition was the product of the best schooling available in his day (Donatus and Victorinus) and of an intense personal involvement with the literature and language of classical Latinity. But the true dimensions of this involvement need some sober appraisal and study. His indebtedness to earlier authors frequently goes beyond the relationship of verbatim and acknowledged quotation. Whole sections are lifted from Cyprian, Tertullian, Theophrastus, Seneca; and there are constant briefer allusions, reminiscences, verbal plays, and echoes. His first book against Jovinian, for example, contains pages of this type of reference, a vast display of erudition if perhaps an unconvincing argument.

Since A. Lübeck first delved into the question of what pagan authors were known to Jerome, succeeding generations of scholars have discovered more and more authors, pagan and Christian, Latin and Greek, that “Jerome knew.” What has been generally ignored is the derivative character of much of Jerome’s acquaintance. He had read some of these authors, not in the original text, but in essays and anthologies. Latin literature had, since the time of Cicero, delighted in series of *exempla*, pointed anecdotes or quotations designed to illustrate a theme. The related genre of the prose medley, originally a forerunner of the classical Latin *satura*, grew in vogue with the developing appetite for secondary literature that marks the epitomes so popular in the decline of Silver Latinity. Jerome is here largely a child of his times. The history of this later literature is filled with the names of epitomizers of major literary works of the past, minor compendia and manuals, as well as collections of curious anecdotes and antiquarian lore like the *Attic Nights*. Although much of this has come down to us, much more has mercifully been lost; and
most of what we have now recovered of classical antiquity came into the hands of Jerome, and later of the Middle Ages, only in pericope. From another point of view, it is quite in keeping with the established Roman tradition to entertain this richness of quotation in one’s literary work, in the expectation that the subtlety and brilliance of the allusion will be recognized and appreciated by the equally erudite reader. The question in Jerome’s case is rather how well he actually knew the various authors from whom he quotes.

The question is further complicated by Jerome’s less than candid manner of quotation. He appears to have made some deliberate effort to conceal the immediate sources from which he gathered material with which to grace his *exempla*. Jerome really appears to be quoting Seneca, Theophrastus, and others, in a rather loose form of reference, giving the impression that he has read them all at length.¹⁷

One is forced to admit that this type of literature is not in the very best interests of the humanist tradition because it is not truly involved with classical ideals and models either in content or in form, that is, in the ideal of balance, nobility of expression, and aesthetic harmony. It is, rather, a curious, anthologizing, and even anecdotal, preoccupation with the trivia of classicism, an involvement with a footnote literature that can easily preclude any higher sense of appreciation. What we encounter here, in a word, is discontinuity with the spirit and continuity only with the formal ornaments of classical humanistic literature and spirit.

Further disadvantages of such erudition are its penchant for verbal association rather than sense and meaning, and, at least in the case of Jerome, a well-indulged propensity to quotation. None of all this was known to the Middle Ages, who supposed instead that Jerome had
his is purely imitative satire: there are few proper names that are the product of his own experience, and there is little personal observation, simply the most generic statements, about wine, women, merrymaking, the faults of some of the secular clergy, or vilification of his opponents in set formulas. Jerome would thus appear not to be a satirist in the Roman style.

Such an evaluation, however, fails to take into account some important facts. Jerome was justified in claiming spiritual kinship with the Roman satiric tradition in prose or verse. The mordant character of Roman satire is often dependent upon the careful manipulation of words. This careful attention to language precludes to some extent autopsia, that is, personal observation of the subject matter that is being satirized; animus, a strong held personal attitude against the objects of one's attack (like Juvenal's indignatio); and finally, even elaboration of the terms and topoi employed in the satire. The objective of the satirist is—at least, in part—to emulate his predecessor in the refined expression of commonplaces while making some personal contribution to the genre of satire.

Jerome, too, achieves this objective, though with lesser invention and a rather heavier hand. It is in this sense that he is most truly a satirist, not a man possessed by indignatio that simply swells into spontaneous vilification or the righteous wrath of God's holy ones. There must always be something of this lack of immediacy in Roman satire, with final composition several times removed from inspiration. One cannot sustain animus throughout the time it takes to write cleverly; although the objects of satire remain and the purpose may still wax strong, there is more scope for verbal display than for violent feeling.

We have seen that Jerome is not unsympathetic to
the Roman tradition of erudite quotation. Even when he is simply cataloging *exempla* from antiquity, Jerome could well count upon his readers' recognizing his sources and looking upon his use of them as stylistic embellishment and as evidence of his scholarly authority. The extensive use of quotation is indeed a hallmark of the satiric tradition and reaches its climax in Juvenal.

Jerome's satire in the fourth century, however, suffers from a certain discontinuity with classical satire. What survives of the Roman tradition are largely the lesser ingredients of satire: topicality, quotation, the borrowed phrase. The larger framework had already dissipated, and together with it much of the careful discipline and skill of composition. There has been relatively little discussion as to whether Jerome expected or wanted his readers to recognize his sources. If this was his desire, it would be an example of continuity with other satirists—Juvenal, for example, and Horace—and of the anthologizing tendencies of later Latin literature in general. But, as we have seen, though Jerome makes a conscious effort to parade his "bookshelf" of classical authors, he conceals its ultimate sources, which one must suspect are largely secondary—in Jerome's case, the lost misogynistic treatises of Porphyry and Seneca.

Jerome's position in the history of misogynistic literature is well established. Not only does he sum up the combined *topoi* from antiquity, but he also stands as the fountainhead from which much of the antifeminism of the Middle Ages flows. Misogyny, like satire, is neither particularly Christian nor humanistic in spirit, although it antedates (and may well survive) both Christianity and humanism. Historically it forms an understandable continuity within both traditions. The Roman church, like the society of the antique and clas-
sical past, was male-dominated. The Old Testament is male-oriented, as was the ancient Near Eastern culture upon which it drew. The fourth century had learned to view woman as something more than a ready target for satire. Woman presented an occasion for temptation and sin, which, in this context, is equated with unchastity. The pairing of this vice and the repertory of ancient antifeminist bromides is a powerful combination, particularly in the hands of a man who has a way with words and an ax to grind. Thus the bearing and the content of commonplace witticisms at the expense of womankind were altered. Jerome is further concerned with promoting the monastic vocation, and he himself shows a serious psychological eccentricity.

The curious taste of many of Jerome's examples and allusions is another case in point here. In itself, there is nothing especially humanistic about scurrility, for it is a violation of that balance between nobility of thought and its harmonious verbal expression. There has always existed, however, a literary convention of scurrility, with well-defined rules for its use. In Roman satire, point and spirit are gained by sophisticated language (like the educatedly ribald limerick), a mock-heroic quality that exploits the disproportion between the area of human experience being described and the vehicle of its description. Jerome's style often goes beyond these nice limits.

There is, finally, a certain shock value in the use of less than perfectly decorous vocabulary and diction. In Jerome's case one cannot always know what consideration have determined the tone and taste of his writing, but there is evidence to lead one to conclude that it is not always sophistication. Fundamentally it is not the highest classical tradition: the subject matter is allowed to outweigh care and attention to expression.
Language and Style

One point that emerges from an examination of the various genres and styles of composition that Jerome employs is his mastery and variety in mode and level of expression. This is in keeping with classical humanism: rhetorical propriety decrees that there be both a style and a level of diction for every occasion, and this is to be scrupulously observed, even in the breach, as, for example, in the case of mock epic.

In the exegetical works and commentaries Jerome is objective and sober, granted the prejudice of the Christian exegete for the fuller sense and typologies. It is only in his letters that he indulges in the rhetorical flourishes that later seem to have been corrected or restrained by maturity. The *Lives of the Desert Fathers* are jewels of careful composition, and the polemics range between the descriptive style of satire (that is, careful attention to words and diction in the sophisticated reviling of his adversaries) and the outpouring of ill humor against his opponents. In his use of the other genres he has some claim to classical humanism, but his polemical style argues a lack of true humanistic insight: Jerome reneges on the effort to couch his thought in the appropriate form and bring it to the proper level of elegance.

We may profitably examine Jerome’s unquestioned way with words. He is first of all as translator, involved with the precise range of meaning in rendering the original Greek and Hebrew texts into Latin. Ancient translation in itself is not the finely accomplished rendering of sense for sense and poetry for poetry that we are accustomed to expect today, and, in the case of the Bible, there are other considerations as well. The force, sometimes the very presence, of idiom is often over-
looked because of the conviction, already gaining in popularity during the lifetime of Jerome, that inspiration is inherent in the words themselves and not just in the message or the meaning. This conviction, and the understandable effort to perpetuate the message, results in a tendency to concentrate on the rephrasing of the original text in a one-for-one relationship, reproducing the words rather than the meaning, so that any deeper message, latent in the word but not clear to Christian thinking at that time, would not be lost for the contemplation of later ages.

Psalm 121 will serve as an example. The Vulgate translation contains the cryptic (and literal) rendition Jerusalem quae aedificatur ut civitas, cuius participatio eius in idipsum. The more recent Latin translation reads in se compacta tota. What is missed here is the force of an expression like the Greek εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ or ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ, "together." In 1 Cor. 7:5 this same failure to recognize the idiom gives the reading et iterum revertimini in idipsum, which is then made to take on the sinister implication that the Apostle "blushes to refer to the sex act by name," using the phrase id ipsum as a substitute.25

Despite many errors, Jerome should be criticized only in the light of the better control enjoyed by modern scholars over the real meaning of words in ancient languages and of higher modern standards in the art of translation. The Vulgate is universally acknowledged as a supreme accomplishment, a brilliant wedding of reverential and elevated style with vocabulary and locution accessible to the common Christian and achieving the dignity and the immediacy proper to the sacred text. Further, the Vulgate, canonized in its turn, enjoys the same textual inviolability as did the original; profound theological argument has always exhibited a
retrograde tendency to revolve about the word and letter rather than the underlying message and spirit of the sacred text.

The precise range of meaning, however, even in the translation of Scripture, is not what should always be most characteristic of the humanist's concerns. It is more the province of the theologian, a role Jerome was little qualified to assume. What the true humanist, in the fourth century, ought to have recognized was that considerable development had occurred and was still occurring in the very words he used. This is to be noted not only in Scripture, but in every area of the new Christian vocabulary.

Although the detailed methodology for the study of comparative vocabulary and connotative uses of words is not yet complete, many examples can still be adduced. A number of these words have already been pointed out. Perhaps the most obvious instance of Jerome's tendency to equate the connotative values of the Christianized vocabulary with the less differentiated usage of the same words in earlier authors is at the end of his first book Against Jovinian, where the word *virgo*, in its fullest Christian connotation—that is, a woman who has dedicated herself to Christ in perpetual chastity—is taken as a key word for stringing together a long list of *virgines Romanae et Graecae* who are held up as models for the Christian world and proof of the fact that virginity has ever been held in highest repute. As we shall later discover, the word *virgo* was dear to Jerome for other reasons as well.

Analysis of Latin word order in the writings of a particular author, a study developed by Marouzeau,

has two specific purposes: first, to determine how naturally the author writes Latin or to what era of Latinity his style must be assimilated; second, to determine
how far he exploits the potential of Latin to express subtle nuance by shifts in word position. The verb in the Latin sentence, for example, depending upon its position as initial, medial, or final, can assume fine overtones of meaning; and the adjective, to achieve contrast or in order to invest a word with new force, can, for example, precede rather than follow its noun or even be separated from it by a brief disjunctive element. Similar observations hold true for the other parts of speech, and these elements all lend themselves to statistical analysis. Some work has been done along these lines with the text of Saint Jerome.  

Jerome's style, like that of many of his contemporaries, leans heavily toward the nonperiodic Senecan prose style. It is characterized primarily by a less involved syntax, shorter sentence patterns, and rhetorical display. The increased parataxis allows greater concentration on the potential for striking expression and clever nuance inherent in the nominal cluster (the noun and its adjectives or genitives) and the meaningful positioning of the verb. This tendency has reasonably been called baroque, in that the style appears to set higher value upon ornamentation and detail than it does upon the classical ideal of total form. Scholars have seen these developments as a deviation, a losing sight of the true classical spirit. But it is also, and equally important for our study here, a ready technique for developing the Christian paradox. As such, it was popular long before the time of Jerome—so much so, it has been observed, that the paradox as a Christian insight into reality had lost a good measure of the force of the paradoxical and had become something of Christian commonplace. Jerome seldom misses an opportunity to exploit the emphasis or effect that can be
achieved by variation in the position of words within their proper syntactic group. This tendency is observable to different degrees in the various genres of composition, but it is always in evidence.

There is, moreover, evidence that Jerome had succumbed to the temptation (or perhaps had fallen victim to the process) that seizes upon the humanist whose concern with capturing a culture not entirely contemporary in spirit to his own experience forces him to cast the substance of his thinking in the mold of a more antique expression. The antique language, in its terms and concepts and in its patterns of expression, exercises a sort of mortmain upon the content of what is said. This is particularly true of Latin, where the development of an adequately abstract and plastic medium for the expression of the classical ideal of the Golden Age is intimately interwoven with the very essence of that ideal itself. Form and content are thus so interdependent that the vitality of the one cannot (or at least does not, historically) really survive the decline and eclipse of the other.

If a modern scholar sets himself to compose in Latin, and really enters deeply into the spirit of the language, it is truer to say that Latin is writing through him rather than that he is writing Latin. There is evidence that this is already the case in the relationship between the fourth century and the classical past. A warm familiarity with the literary productivity of classicism is always a prime ingredient of the humanistic attitude, even if the quotation and imitation are more a superficial jeu d'esprit than a true allegiance to the ideal of the earlier humanism. In the case of Jerome there are many other factors to substantiate and reinforce this argument: his love of classical rhetoric, his involvement with a
purely verbal level of experience, his preoccupation with words and meanings, his ready grasp of the actual patterns of writing and *bon mots* from the past.

**Scripture**

The patristic usage of Scripture reached a climax in Saint Jerome. One drawback to his undeniable accomplishments in this field was his extreme overfamiliarity with the sacred page. He knew it so well that willy-nilly the quotations flood his mind. The famous Letter 22, for example, might be studied as a classic example of the cento form, a composition made up in part of sheer scriptural quotation, not all of it apropos, and loosely stitched together into a patchwork. He personalizes and allegorizes Scripture and frequently quotes or alludes with such passing brevity that a series of determined editors have still not run down every reference. The principle of organization is frequently mere verbal association, facile but not always really accurate. This is in keeping with the inherited literary tradition: it functions as a sort of extension of the "Great Books" prescribed for the educated man and harmonizes well with the classical practice of learned quotation. By the fourth century firsthand acquaintance with Scripture gives rise to a body of Christian literature, and familiarity with its less widely known passages is the proud mark of the Christian scholar and man of culture.

We have seen, however, that by the fourth century Scripture was also becoming source material for theology. Hence, confusion arises as to the precise frame of reference in which a given quotation is to be understood, whether as learned display or as an attempt to demonstrate the infallible truth of a statement in a theological
context. This applies especially to the polemical use of Scripture, where context and purpose call for dogmatic proof based on the sacred text, but the style invites learned display in quotation and allusion. Whereas the commentary becomes the technical tool and repository of theology, and the homily applies Scripture for practical ends, the polemical usage of Scripture is often an excursus into a different realm, with little pretense to serious scholarship. The polemical application of Scripture in the Fathers is a subject that has received scanty attention. It is, however, especially in Jerome, a curious mixture whose basic elements can be at least briefly illustrated.

An interesting example is the tendentious equation of the force of an expression used in one context with its quite different application in a different setting. In *AJ* 1.7d Jerome quotes the Apostle’s advice, “Do not deprive each other except perhaps by consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5), in order to demonstrate that sex in marriage and Christian prayer cannot possibly coexist. He then points out that Paul also bids us to “pray always” (1 Thess. 5:17), and concludes that we are thus never “to be subject to the service of wedlock, for everytime I render my wife her due I cannot pray.”

A scriptural expression is often pressed to yield a meaning it was not intended to bear in the original text. In commenting on the force of God’s command to the first parents, “Increase and multiply and fill the earth,” Jerome points out that this does not apply to Christians, whose “citizenship is in heaven” (*AJ* 1.16). This exploitation of a secondary word can be carried further, as in Letter 22.10, where Adam’s original sin is described as being motivated by gluttony because it involved eating. Again, drawing upon his expertise in
language and skill in translation, Jerome embarks upon learned if tendentious interpretations of such key words as *almah* in the Hebrew text of Isa. 7:14, defending and further restricting the bearing of the prophecy of the virgin birth. He insists upon "chastity" as the proper rendering of *sophrosyne*, rather than "prudence," and coins a neologism *castificat*, "chastifies," in place of the more common reading "sanctifies" in *AJ* 1.27, 37.

Jerome occasionally appears to miss the basic idiom, as we have already seen: εἰς or ἐν τῷ ἀνώτῳ in 1 Cor. 7:5, for example. In this connection, however, Jerome can always fall back upon the fuller sense, the wealth of hidden meaning with which God has filled his sacred text. This, in turn, leads to further extensions of the literal meaning. There is allegorization, sometimes quite extended, and typology in the treatment of the deaths of Moses and Joshua in *AJ* 1.2 ff. There is mystical interpretation of proper names, of Rome at the end of the *Treatise against Jovinian*, or, more pointedly, of Lebanon (whiteness—of purity), of Sanir, of Hermon (which is said to mean "consecration"—of a virgin), *AJ* 1.30.

Jerome often indulges in numerology to support interpretation. The number *two* (the number of the sex act) is not a good number because in the Hebrew text of Genesis, God is not recorded as having seen that the work of the second day was good, though he finds the work of the other days good in Genesis 1 (*AJ* 1.16). The Parable of the Sower furnishes ammunition in this same context: the 30, 60, and 100 that describe the yield refer to three ascending grades of virginity.

In establishing a framework for his interpretation, Jerome is willing to support either of two opposing positions. If an Old Testament example corroborates his argument, he asserts the radical continuity of Old
and New Testament revelation. If it contradicts his position, he then argues for the lack of continuity and emphasizes the newness of the Gospel mandate. The same ambivalence is noted in references to pagan examples. If the pagan model reinforces his point, then “Christians ought at least to equal the accomplishments of noble pagans”; but if the pagan is opposed to the Christian, it is divested of all authority as being without the tradition of the Christian revelation.

Jerome can also read between the lines of Scripture. In 1 Pet. 3:7, husbands are instructed to live with their wives *iuxta scientiam*, or *secundum scientiam*, and to “pay honor to the woman as the weaker vessel.” This eventually is forced to mean that perfect chastity in wedlock is what the Apostle means to prescribe for Christians (*AJ* 1.7e).

In addition to adopting an intransigent interpretation of the Apostle’s words about marriage and developing his argument by an overly rigorous logic (*AJ* 1.7–9), Jerome also determines that there is a difference between what the Apostle desires Christians to do and what he only concedes to them in view of more serious possible evils (*AJ* 1.8). He also develops an argument based on noblesse oblige: the Christian cannot rest content with the imperfect moral obligations enunciated by the Old Testament (*AJ* 1.24a). Drawing upon superior familiarity with the sacred page, Jerome can easily outmaneuver the opponent who dares to close with him. Where Jovinian had appealed to Solomon as support for his argument in favor of a like reward in heaven for both the virgin and the married, Jerome takes up the same figure of Solomon as a man of considerable marital experience who had spoken strongly against the advisability of taking a wife (*AJ* 1.28a). Again, against the interpretation of the story of the
wedding at Cana (John 2:1-9) that argues Christ’s willingness to accept marriage as a way of life, Jerome counters that by going to a wedding party only once, Christ has instructed us to marry no more than once (AJ 1.46).

Now, much of the above might suggest the conclusion that Jerome is involved in demonstrable error in the polemical application of Scripture. There is one other facet of the patristic use of the Bible, however, that still needs to be considered. All the specific types and instances of quotation considered above—and they are no more than representative of a much larger selection—can serve primarily not so much to demonstrate as to reinforce the writer’s sense of the unity of his source and to reestablish a living contact with the authority for, and inspiration of, his Christian theology and religion. This reassuring sense of unity derives from the fact that both authority and inspiration come via the same medium, and a subtle reinforcement of the basic position is achieved by reflecting, in an aside at times, how a given quotation corroborates the central truths under discussion. This methodology centers the writer’s subject matter within a setting of homogeneous doctrine, all of whose elements illustrate at least the general background upon which the exegete bases his argument. They may also serve to test the validity of one element by establishing the harmony with which it adapts to all the other elements of the Christian religion. This process need not always involve the most logical interpretation of the texts; often there are applications and interpretations that derive allegory, interpretation of names, numerology, typology, and a “fuller sense.”

The quotation, then, is meant, not as a full and proper demonstration, but as a reflection upon how harmoniously the whole edifice of Christian awareness fits to-
gether, and as an inspirational renewal of the sense of purpose and dignity of the Christian vocation that is dictating the objectives of the polemical writing. The liturgical setting of many of these texts further enhances the immediacy and effectiveness of the process. The purpose and methodology of the early Christian liturgy and homily involve constant and pointed repetition, in mythic form, of the basic truths of the faith, such that their very familiarity and the noble grandeur of their liturgical expression \(^{32}\) (and here the Roman *gravitas* stands out to fullest advantage, as does the Roman’s involvement with exact expression of dogmatic truth) become a powerful tool for understanding the fundamentals of the Christian religion. If understanding is humanly impossible, these texts serve to fix the correct terms of the dogmatic statement of the mysteries and find practical application in motivating a life of special dedication. Scripture and the catechism of Christian doctrine take on a particularly compelling tone when the words are encountered in a sacral and liturgical context. This consideration, incidentally, explains why the quotation often runs far beyond the point where it properly applies to the argument and thus invites a sort of meditative vagary that, in its way, accomplishes the very same objectives.

Even apart from this liturgical encounter, private reading of Scripture nourished the piety and conviction of these men, and the word of the Bible was always close at hand when they came to pondering the basic realities of Christian life. The patristic attitude toward Scripture is thus perhaps best described as omnidirectional, and the primary concern for one of the various possible applications of the sacred text must never be taken to exclude the simultaneous application of others as well.

There is, in Jerome’s case, the further element of
authority as an interpreter of the sacred word. The trans­lator has a position of special privilege as interpreter of what he has translated, especially if he has in his youth copied and translated the commentaries of the mighty Origen and other learned men, and thus can support his own views and opinions with copious au­thority. Jerome, however, goes beyond his depth in taking the position that his word is authoritative not only on matters of translation but also of canon, criticism, and exegesis of the kind that produces doctrine and theology. This exaggerated claim, like other pecu­liarities in Jerome’s use of Scripture, could hardly have been recognized in its true light by the Middle Ages. Jerome was, in fact, rather an object for imitation, personifying the ideal of a Christian scholar in command of his literary sources (the Bible) and able to quote and adapt, and so to deliver the sacred text of long-hidden meaning, which he can then enlist to bring about Christian reform. What has actually hap­pened is this: the passage of time had invested the fourth century with that same aura of authority and holiness that the fourth century had held toward Apost­olic times. Jerome and the other great Fathers were thus endowed with a certain inviolability as vehicles in the continuing chain of revelation and tradition.

Temperament and Character

There is one final area that must be briefly touched upon, evident on the most superficial examination of Jerome’s career and writing, yet difficult to substan­tiate. Although one must exercise extreme caution in assessing the psychological balance of great men solely on the basis of literary evidence, the question does have some direct bearing upon Jerome’s career as a human-
ist. P. Steur has drawn up a sort of psychological check­
list as a control on Jerome's character, and, more re­
cently, Dr. Charles-Henri Nodet has published a lengthy
article on the degree to which Jerome's character and
temperament influenced his literary output. Both stu­
dies draw heavily upon the corpus of the saint's writings
for their major evidence, and both are properly judi­
cious in their avoidance of the many pitfalls that could
arise from misreading the many commonplace refer­
ences.

The conclusions arrived at by Nodet are of the most
interest in evaluating Jerome's contributions to human­
ism. Many scholars have already pointed out, apropos
of Jerome's dreams and temptations, that had the saint
eaten more decently and slept more regularly, he might
have fared better in his daily encounters with the noon­
day devil. Nodet delves deeper into the underlying psy­
chology and finds Jerome's sexuality obsessive and re­
gressive. Evidence for this is his contempt for marriage,
his inability to fathom the meaning of conjugal love,
and the extreme nature of the advice he offers for the
preservation of chastity. His aggressiveness was strong
and poorly sublimated—witness the perennial irasci­
bility, the suggestive remarks, and the character of the
relationship he maintained with his few real friends.
Intellectually mature, he was sexually quite immature.
He was satisfied with a life of subtle dialectics, stub­
born and unsubtle in his thinking, drawing upon his
vast erudition largely for the permanent confirmation
of his own prejudices.

Now, these are damning judgments indeed, and they
are conclusions that we should be inclined to moderate,
in view of the above discussion, or simply even to dis­
miss as having little bearing on the discussion of hu­
manism. There is, however, one significant point in a
study where vocabulary is of prime importance. Once again we must be aware of the facile assumption that words mean the same thing to everyone who uses them.

It is impossible not to note a certain equivocation in the specific vocabulary Jerome employs in his attacks upon sex, womankind, marriage, and things un-ascetical. He is using the same words that the theologian or master of spiritual direction uses, and to the casual observer, they appear to be the same: the vocabularies do in fact overlap. But there are fundamental variations in the formal approach. The language of the ascetic or spiritual director is objective, whereas that of Jerome is subjective and psychologically ridden with overtones and innuendos that inevitably but subtly vitiate the nature of the advice he is giving, so as to turn it into the projection of his own shortcomings and deep-seated fears. Virgo, for example, is a technical term in the vocabulary of the master of ascetic direction. In the earlier Roman vocabulary it was a less differentiated term, signifying maiden or marriageable girl or recently married young woman—or virgin. In the Christian context it is always laudatory, but in Jerome the word is all but an obsession. The same is true, in the inverse order, of concupiscentia, which always means evil desire.

We have already observed how Jerome could be unaware of the shift in connotative meanings of words, simply assuming they had always been the same for everyone whoever used them as they were in his own mind. He can thus construct what are to his mind telling arguments based on this material continuity in expression, and never realize the differences involved. It has been observed that men of considerable psychic energy, which should be applied to the totality of human living, when they focus it instead upon a rigidly circumscribed ascetical ideal, tend to overdevelop their verbal level
of experience to the atrophy of their life experience. Thus words take on a life apart, like Plato’s Ideas, endowed with a meaning, reality, and value all their own and capable, in the hands of a master, of enjoying an afterlife as well.

Thus it is Jerome’s vast influence upon the sympathetic audience of the Middle Ages that puts him in a unique position to contribute to the definitive setting of the laudatory and pejorative overtones of the Western Christian vocabulary—a fact unknown to the ages who accepted his authority so unreservedly. The people to whom Jerome addressed most of his work were men and women of the perfect or “desexualized” type, and it must be admitted that much of what he writes, if interpreted as bearing on upon the smaller community of the would-be elect, has considerable relevance. Even so, the pride of God’s saints was visited upon Jerome long before their holiness. His reputation for being an uncompromising ascetic is owing more to a deep-rooted antisexual orientation and a morbid indulgence of neurotic insecurities than to any deliberate and manly sacrifice of something good for something better.

Although this conclusion can be easily overstated, the fact remains that the content and bearing of Jerome’s writings were congenial to his spiritual descendants, the medieval monks who depended upon his teachings and shared his ideals. There is a deeper medieval attraction for Jerome that mere admiration and emulation of his classical erudition and literary brilliance. The position of the medieval scholar is easily appreciated. Scripture, and commentaries on Scripture, and the orthodox opera of the great Church Fathers were so much his literary and religious diet that the common words of the Bible (words that can be applied to philosophy or humanistic education before they become part of the
specialized vocabulary for theology or Christian ascetical ideals) were so charged with new force of meaning as to overwhelm the medieval monk with their new message. After the long struggle with the secular clergy, the monks emerged victorious, and it was their ideals that formed the pattern for Christian aspiration and Christian humane education. The good words had all been preempted, and it was hard to find a spokesman for the other side—mere orthodoxy. The words heard by the Christian people were invested with a traditional authority, and their application extended equally well to the intellectual and to the spiritual spheres. Jerome is certainly not the only source responsible for the medieval state of affairs. No other single figure, however, serves as a point of convergence for so many streams of influence: mastery of Scripture, psychological bias, classical erudition, reputation for asceticism and holiness, champion of the monastic cause, role as spiritual adviser, mastery of words, and absolute quotability.

*Jerome and Humanism*

A humanist must have a wide appreciation of all of those *artes quae ad humanitatem pertinente*. Jerome really does not. Despite his boast of being *Ciceronianus*, Jerome has taken Cicero’s way with words and has missed much of the fullness that Cicero gave to them, although he shares the humanist’s enjoyment of words simply for their own sake. Aesthetic intuition is an integral element of classical humanism, and the Christian view in general, Jerome’s in particular, is at variance with this fundamental attitude. Jerome’s largely verbal level of involvement with the inherited ideals, moreover, precludes much of this fuller humanist perspective. He does indeed draw upon the past, and he
does so for the sake of the present; but he misreads it by presuming a continuity of meaning in words and language. More fundamentally, he enlists the past to serve the present not as a model but as material to be subordinated to the building of a new edifice. This distortion dilutes, and even contaminates, the purity of his draughts from the fountain of classical pagan humanism.

Now, it is true that no Christian could have been entirely free of this failing, certainly not any Christian of the fourth century. Thus Jerome only shares a more fundamental attitude of the religion of his time—the tendency to make nature and human experience ancillary to the supernatural and to the prerogatives of grace. The Christian, even the Christian who had retained or rediscovered as much as was humanly possible of the legacy from the past, could no longer comfortably abide by such a large portion of its ideals as to accept classical humanism as a model for human endeavor, even upon earth and within the lesser span of man’s terrestrial career. There was everywhere too little genuine formal continuity, too little trust, too great a hesitancy to focus upon the human or upon humanism. Ideally, as in Augustine’s vision, the prospect of Christian man as a dilemma of warring worlds of flesh and spirit can be solved by granting each element its due, but the vision applied is less convincing. Historically, the Christian view of man is overly divinized. When Renaissance man appears, he is a sinner made to aspire after sanctity. The saints’ lives became background for other, more human feelings, an admission of general inadequacy, a human pride at seeing some people achieve such lofty heights and the comfortable realization that this is not for all men. Goals and ideals were balanced with potential and experience in the rediscovered hu-
manity that could be Christian without forfeiting man’s capacity for humanism.

This did not happen in the fourth century, which not only missed something essential of what later Christianity was destined to develop into, but also directed its development along some awkward lines. It did in some measure prescribe the pattern for a future Christian humanism; and Jerome himself, though he did not draw everything he should have from the classical ideal and though he is guilty of demonstrable misdirection in his championing of the classical cause, did, for his time and age, represent a high degree of continuity with the classical culture.

One might be tempted to conclude that it is to the credit of the inherent vitality of both humanism and Christianity that the false avenues were eventually abandoned and the harm in large measure undone. I believe that Jerome, in the fourth century, had made a real beginning, for all his shortcomings, and an important beginning at that, in that it was in imitation and admiration of his humanistic learning that subsequent scholars were inspired to labor more successfully at the task of wedding Christianity and humanism in a cultural fusion whose ideals are still vigorous today. This is no mean accomplishment for the crotchety hermit.

The Renaissance has left us two distinct portrayals of Saint Jerome. There is Dürer’s gentle recluse with the serene expression—the ideal of comfortable monastic formation. But there is also El Greco’s picture of Jerome as the dark and troubled soul of medieval Christianity still searching for the vision of a Renaissance. If Jerome is too much a Christian, he is less a humanist for that. And if the Christian excesses of his asceticism are prompted less by a true appraisal of
the Gospel challenge than by a certain imbalance, he does at least tower above the Middle Ages as the one paradoxical embodiment of Christianity and humanism: Christian to excess in the eyes of the Middle Ages and humanist to what they could only regard as perfection.

What is lacking is the balance: Christian humanism must be something more than Christianity plus humanism or humanism plus Christianity. There must be a fusion that results in a new reality: Christianus simul et Ciceronianus. Insofar as this happy coalescence involves compromise and a vision of something that is both essentially new and essentially old, it is beyond the ken of Saint Jerome. His was the sterner task of perpetuating the individual elements without recognizing their potential. And although this is essentially a thankless task, surely we, who lay some claim to the profession of both Christianity and humanism, cannot ever be wholly without gratitude.

1. W. Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture 3 vols. (New York, 1939), 1:279. There are many definitions of humanism as a concept. We are concerned here not so much with the task of comparing or discussing their relative merits as with the work of isolating some of the more important elements and examining how they can or cannot be applied to the figure of Jerome and the fourth century.

2. This distinction and its consequences for the evaluation of history are discussed in greater detail by M. L. W. Laistner, Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire (London, 1931; and Ithaca, N.Y., 1951); and Thought and Letters in Western Europe A.D. 500 to 900 (London, 1931).

3. We must not overlook the ease with which the Roman philosophies and ethics, equally practical and moral in their orientation, fell in with the Christian moral Gospel. The community of interest was, in fact, so great that the Moral Letters of Seneca came to be regarded as Christian literature of a sort,
their author presumed to have been converted by Saint Paul in Rome.

4. The Christian draws not only from the Old Testament prophets but from Roman tradition as well. The Sibylline Books and the feeling for omens and auguries are easily Christianized. Witness Vergil's *paolo maiora canamus* and its devious interpretations over the Christian ages, and the express linking of the two streams of prophecy in the *Dies Irae: teste David cum Sibylla*.

5. *Sortes Biblicae* and *Sortes Vergilianae* made their way into the Middle Ages side by side.

6. Jerome's own writing, it must be noted, exhibits unqualified reverence for, and acceptance of, the status quo in scholarship and religion that are normally associated with the Christian tradition of a much later era.

7. This Christian intolerance is not always the result of deliberate and honorable concern for the purity of the Christian philosophy. It easily lapses into obstinate refusal to entertain, as a matter of principle, any alien sources of authority. In a man like Saint Jerome, this tendency is rather more in evidence.

8. The Church Fathers argue, for example, that revelation does indeed give insights into truths that would otherwise either be totally unknown, less accurately known, harder to acquire, or less surely believed in, and so on.

9. One could easily make the case that antiquity had also felt the need of similar reassurance. In the periods of decline from the classical ideal, we find a lack of direction and certitude that is generally called a failure of nerve, from the humanist point of view an apt enough term for a reaction that seeks to fix upon the metaphysical or transcendental. Christianity is sometimes made to appear as simply another of these mystery cults, like the later developments of Greek philosophy or Mithra, but there are some fundamental differences. There is a good historical survey of these trends in J. H. Randall, Jr., *Hellenistic Ways of Deliverance and the Making of the Christian Synthesis* (New York, 1970).

10. Cf. especially the Letters to the Thessalonians.

11. Exaggerated asceticism is the hallmark of the gnostic spirit as well.


13. One caution must be observed here: in their literary endeavor the Fathers are always essentially "more antique
Romans than the Christians." It is largely a question of degree: form and expression are never allowed to gain the upper hand.

14. The best introduction to this study is E. R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (London, 1952).

15. The position taken by E. K. Rand, for example, in his chapter on Jerome in Founders of the Middle Ages (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), fails to raise many important questions.


17. A good example is the Treatise against Jovinian (AJ), 1.41–49, with its catalogue of examples from antiquity, and 2.1–14, on the medicinal properties of certain foods and the dietary habits of various nations. These chapters have been extensively studied by E. Bickel, Diatribe in Senecae philosophi fragmenta (Leipzig, 1915), who makes a fairly convincing argument for charting their transmission to AJ via the agency of the now lost writings of Porphyry, a dependence never acknowledged by Jerome.


20. Wiesen, chap. 7.

21. The terms of comparison are sometimes indelicate (AJ 1.4, 7), as is the reference to incommoda nuptiarum (Letter 22), or to sexual differences (AJ 1.36d), or to functions of nature (AJ 1.36b).

22. Apparent, for example, in the Epodes and earlier satire of Horace as it is influenced by Lucilius.

23. Juvenal develops this strain to perfection.

24. Some of the writing of Catullus is a good example of this usage in the hands of an unquestioned master.

25. AJ 1.8. The reduplication cuius-eius is also characteristic of translation from the Hebrew where the relative, being undifferentiated in case, gender, and so forth, requires the addition of a personal pronoun or a possessive adjective.


27. There is a study on Jerome's use of clausulae by Sister Margaret Clare Herron, A.M., A Study of the Clausulae in the Writings of St. Jerome (Washington, D.C., 1937). The word order of the Lives of the Desert Fathers has been analyzed by

28. This can be interpreted as the application of the techniques of verse writing to prose.

29. AJ 1.32. Almah is perhaps better translated as "girl of marriageable age," like the Latin virgo. Jerome is determined to defend the technical force of the word.

30. He defends this position in Letter 49.19 by appealing to the authority of Vergil, numero deus impare gaudet (Écl. 8.75).

31. The interpretation is further supported by a sort of natural-law argument derived from the Roman method of counting on the fingers. AJ 1.3.

32. Cf., for example, the formal Roman liturgical prayer, the Collect, which is constructed upon the most classical lines, observing great nicety in form, word positioning, and metrical cadence or cursus.
