EUGENIO GARIN

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AN AMERICAN STUDENT taking Eugenio Garin's courses in moral philosophy at the University of Florence in 1961–62 is awed by the old world ritual that begins each class: an attendant in a white coat arrives to stoke the coal stove at the front of the room and then stands patiently in the doorway watching for the moment the professor will approach, at which point he clicks his heels together sharply and cries out, "Il professore!" The dozen or so students all rise and wait for the professor to signal, with a gracious wave of his hand, that they may be seated.

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The man who would become Italy's greatest historian of Renaissance culture, and at the same time its foremost living philosopher, was born in Rieti, in 1909, into the pomp and circumstance of Italy's academic milieu as the son of a high-school teacher. It was the era of Benedetto Croce's version of Hegelian idealism, a grandeur of rhetorical absolutes, though most of his own education was to come under the official Fascism of Giovanni Gentile's Ministry of Education and Culture. Garin, later a friend of both men, from the start resolved on being anti-idealist and anti-fascist. During the Fascist years, he said, he had to learn how to wear a mask and speak through it. Italian intellectuals also fell under the spell of a third figure, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), the founder of the Italian Communist Party. Yet while his instincts were to the Left, Garin explicitly rejected Marxist dogmatism as well, favoring the English Enlightenment as his philosophical path (his undergraduate thesis at the University of Florence in 1929 was on Hobbes's *Leviathan*). For the rest of his life, in more than three thousand publications, he tried to articulate the terms of a new democratic sensibility.

His bibliography is so enormous that three editions of it, edited by his students, were published (by Laterza), beginning with his sixtieth birthday, then his seventieth and eightieth, before the entire list was put online as EGAR on his ninetieth by the Istituto e Museo di storia della Scienza. His books range from the philosophical and historical, as in *Medioevo e rinascimento* (1954), *La cultura italiana* (1962), *La cultura del rinascimento* (1967); to the scientific, as in *Scienza e vita civile nel Rinascimento italiano* (1975), and *Aristotelismo veneto e scienza moderna* (1981); to the astrological, *Lo zodiaco della vita* (1976); and to the autobiographical, *La philosophia come sapere storico* (1990), to list but a few. Several are available in English.

For two decades he worked as a high-school teacher, first in a school for laborers, then for five years in Palermo, and finally in Florence. He wrote articles for Gentile's *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, and was invited by Gentile (assassinated by partisans in 1944), to finish his

history of Italian philosophy. First published in 1947, it was redone by Garin in 1966 to include modern Italian philosophy, of which it is still the definitive work. His first book had been on the English Enlightenment, but he was drawn to the Italian Renaissance as a source for it, a novel idea. In 1937 he published *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, which established him as a major Renaissance scholar. Here he had found his lifelong subject, Italian humanism, and in 1947 published, in German, *Der italienische Humanismus*, which in 1952, as *L'Umanesimo italiano,* became his greatest book (translated into English in 1965 as *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*).

He was appointed to a professorship in 1949 at the University of Florence, where he taught for the next quarter century, but the 1968 student riots left him so disconsolate that he considered resigning, and in 1974 transferred to the Scuola Normale Superiore at Pisa, where he felt it was easier to communicate with students about basic ideas. Teaching, he always maintained passionately, was his "work" and "education the place where ideas are admitted into society," though he had no illusions about the Italian education system. He retired from Pisa in 1984, and moved back to his apartment on Via Crispi in Florence, attended faithfully there by his wife of sixty-seven years, Maria Soro, until her death in 1998, and then by former students and friends until his own death at the age of ninety-five on 29 December 2004.

Garin strongly defended "the historical method" of studying philosophy (following Croce and Gramsci) against those whose "theoretical" interpretations (such as Gentile's) ignored it. He saw in humanism an actual philosophy, not just a literary or philological anomaly. This was the fundamental difference between him and his great lifelong rival (and friend) in Renaissance studies, Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905–1999). Kristeller had been a student of Martin Heidegger (who disparaged the Renaissance for its Latinate humanizing, which he saw as having little to do with actual human experience). For the pro-Nazi Heidegger, if not for the Jewish-refugee Kristeller (who in his graduate classes at Columbia always avoided discussing his mentor as "too painful"), the German Renaissance of the eighteenth century was much more important to the modern world than the fifteenth-century Italian one. But Kristeller's methodology for the study of humanism (*contra* Heidegger) was a study of books, the corpus of texts that extended from the Greeks to the eighteenth century. Garin's methodology instead focused on the nature of humanism relative to the act of being; humanism was a way of being in the world. (For an excellent study of the consequences and contrasts in their work, see the recent book by Christopher S. Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance* [2004]; for Celenza, Garin's approach was "diachronic" and Kristeller's "synchronic.")

Especially after the cataclysm of the war, Garin saw himself as an Italian repudiating this dominant Germanic position. For Garin, the Italian humanists were not mere translators of long-lost ancient texts, like Marsilio Ficino's re-introduction of Plato into European thought, but individualist thinkers who contrasted their own lives, cities, and beliefs with those of the ancients, coming away with an original and new sense of human responsibility. And that such thought had been actuated on Italian (or at least Florentine) soil added profoundly to his own and his country's need to reconstruct itself in the second half of the twentieth century. That the work of Italian humanists had indeed been so greatly philological in restoring and translating ancient texts only added to his view of his own life as a prodigious scholar and teacher of that very period. But the scholarship meant little unless it could be brought to bear on modern life.

In all his Renaissance work he emphasized its significance for today, a rejoinder to the position of Heidegger (a first edition of whose famous "Letter on Humanism" Garin always kept in the German edition of his own first book on Italian humanism). Nowhere is this more evident than in his book *Con Gramsci* (1997), which collected all of Garin's writings on the author of *The Prison Notebooks*. In this, while disdaining Marxism for reducing history to a few guiding principles—a view he followed from Croce—he praises Gramsci for deepening the discussion of the relationship of politics to culture and for stressing the need for Italian intellectuals "to feel the elementary passions of the people." But he has reservations, too, about this perennial fantasy of European intellectuals. "Gramsci wants for everybody the same culture that has been for the few, not another culture; even if it is clear that, breaking the class barriers, it will become through itself something else: quantity will be made quality."

Indeed, in the many interviews he gave in the final years of his life, it is apparent how, inevitably, history got ahead of him. He laments not only television and computers, but technology itself, the triumph of capitalism, the intolerance of Islamic fanatics, et cetera. He did not believe in progress, he said, only in a constant mixing of good things and bad, what he called a "chiaroscuro," and he did not think that the material transformation of values in the twentieth century corresponded to any cultural transformation as well. In fact, in 1998 he said he was tired of the twentieth century and preferred to talk only of earlier ones, "because of an increasing awareness of the incapacity of man to understand at bottom the reality and condition of his existence, his weakness, the bitterness of everything he discovers about himself and his functions." In 1999, he lamented, "I was never an optimist. But

now I have the sense of the defeat of reason as I never had even in the worst moments of the Second World War."

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One day the American student goes to class only to find no one there. He had obviously missed or misunderstood its cancellation. As he walked home, he saw suddenly the reason: full-page headlines on every newspaper stand proclaimed to the city, "Garin parla!" (Garin speaks!). Florence was listening that day to its last great humanist in action.

Elected 1972

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