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‘Cast out into the hellish night’: Pagan Virtue and Pagan Poetics in Lorenzo

Valla’s *De voluptate*

Lorenzo Valla (c.1406-1457) suffered the dubious distinction of being Martin Luther’s favourite humanist.² As such, he has been depicted as the most avant-garde of quattrocento thinkers: the forerunner of Erasmus; an innovator in philology and textual criticism; a rhetorician who cleared away the moribund tangle of scholastic Aristotelian categories and replaced them with a philosophy of language based on usage.³ Yet Valla is also a profoundly contradictory figure. His rival, the humanist scholar Poggio Bracciolini, preferred to describe him as the grand heresiarch of Christianity.⁴ Valla disproved the historical truth of the Donation of Constantine, demolishing papal claims to Italian sovereignty and was eventually brought before the Neapolitan Inquisition, but ended his life as apostolic secretary in the papal curia.⁵ These, and other apparent contradictions in his life and writings, have led to Luther’s favourite humanist being labelled ‘a seriously flippant theologian’.⁶

Valla’s first work set the tone for his controversial career: this was a three-part dialogue, first circulated in 1431 under the name *De voluptate* (*On Pleasure*), later restyled as *De vero bono* and

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² David M. Whitford, ‘The Papal Antichrist: Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 61 (2008), 26-52 (p. 49).

³ For a summary of Valla’s achievements see Jill Kraye, ‘Lorenzo Valla and Changing Perceptions of Renaissance Humanism’, *Comparative Criticism*, 23 (2001), 37-55.

⁴ Poggio Bracciolini, *Invectiva tertia in L. Vallam*, in *Opera Omnia*, 4 vols, ed. by Riccardo Fubini (Torino: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1964-9) I, 249.

⁵ For this part of Valla’s career see A. Ryder, *Alfonso the Magnanimous: King of Aragon, Naples and Sicily, 1396-1458* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 321-5.

⁶ John Monfasani, ‘The Theology of Lorenzo Valla’, in *Humanism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Jill Kraye and M. W. F. Stone (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-23 (p. 13).

ultimately given the title *De vero falsoque bono* (*On the True and False Good*).⁷ *De voluptate* is modelled on Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, a dialogue in which Cicero examines and compares the classical ethical systems of the followers of Epicurus, the Stoics and the Academy.⁸ In *De voluptate*, Valla follows a similar scheme, comparing Stoic, Epicurean, and Christian moral philosophies. Three orators examine whether the true good for man lies in Stoic virtue, in an Epicurean love of corporeal pleasures or in the Christian vision of God. Valla gives these parts to his contemporaries: the jurist Catone Sacco speaks for the Stoics, the poet Maffeo Vegio attacks Stoicism by espousing the teachings of Epicurus, and Antonio da Rho, a Franciscan friar, pronounces a Christian verdict upon them both.⁹

Valla wrote about Epicureanism before the Renaissance rediscovery of classical Epicurean texts. Poggio Bracciolini had not yet circulated his newly-discovered manuscript of first century Epicurean philosopher Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, and Valla wrote without access to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, which discussed Epicurus' teachings in greater detail.¹⁰ Nor had Valla read one of the core texts of Stoic thought in the later Renaissance, as manuscripts containing the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus were fragmentary and scattered across Italy.¹¹ Valla's discussion of the ancient schools of philosophy, therefore, was not based on any new information, but on what could be gleaned from the writings of Cicero and Seneca.

⁷ All quotations are taken from A. K. Hieatt's translation of *De voluptate* (New York: Abaris Books, 1977), based on the revisions to the text Valla made in the final years of his life.

⁸ On the circulation of *De finibus* see *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics*, ed. by L. D. Reynolds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 112-15.

⁹ For Vegio see Michael C. J. Putnam's introduction to his *Short Epics* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004); for da Rho, David Rutherford, *Early Renaissance Invective and the Controversies of Antonio da Rho* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2005), pp. 7-40.

¹⁰ Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, was rediscovered in 1417, but not copied and circulated before the 1430s (Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission*, p. 221). Greek manuscripts of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* were pieced together by Ambrogio Traversari, working on his Latin translation, completed in 1431.

¹¹ *Niccolò Perotti's Version of the Enchiridion of Epictetus*, trans. by Revilo Pendleton Oliver (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954), pp. 20-9.

The notoriety of its author and its weighty subject matter have made *De voluptate* an attractive text for historians. Traditional interpretations hailed the work as representing nothing less than a turning point in the history of western philosophy. Focusing on Valla's apparent sympathy with his first, Epicurean orator, it was argued that he had constructed a new vision of man based upon a more positive evaluation of *voluptas* (pleasure), writing the celebration of sensory pleasures into Christian doctrine, even to the extent of creating a 'Christian Epicureanism'.¹² William Bouwsma, for example, declared the composition of *De voluptate* as the moment at which humanism threw off the shackles of ascetically-inclined, medieval 'stoicising' Christianity.¹³

More recent historiography has, however, revised this view of Valla as a sensory revolutionary. Any depiction of *De voluptate* as a straightforward Epicurean broadside is undermined by its dialogic form, in which each succeeding orator criticises the moral philosophy of the previous speaker. Valla's perspective cannot simply be aligned with that of the Epicurean speaker, for when Valla himself appears in the debate, it is to award 'victory' to the Christian orator.¹⁴ Valla also offers the frequent observation that his Stoic and Epicurean spokesmen are only Christian orators adopting classical masks, with the aim of producing enlightenment through dialectical reasoning.¹⁵ Thus more recent historians have preferred to categorise Valla as a 'Christian Humanist', arguing that whilst Valla challenged the approach and methods of scholastic theology, he did not fundamentally disagree with its conclusions.¹⁶ *De voluptate* must be read in light of Valla's broader aspirations for Christian reform. This is the approach particularly

¹² See Maristella de Panizza Lorch, 'A Defense of the Senses in Lorenzo Valla's Theory of Pleasure' in *Homo Carnalis: The Carnal Aspect of Medieval Human Life*, ed. by Helen Rodite Lemay (Binghamton: Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1990), pp. 121-128.

¹³ William J. Bouwsma, 'The Two Faces of Humanism', in *Itinerarium Italicum: The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of its European Transformations*, ed. by Heiko A. Oberman and Thomas A. Brady Jr (Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 3-60.

¹⁴ *De voluptate* III.xxviii [1] p. 321.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III.vii [6] p. 261.

¹⁶ Charles Nauert, 'Rethinking "Christian Humanism"', in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. by A. Mazzocco (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), pp. 155-80; Jill Krayer, 'Pagan Virtue in Pursuit of Christian Happiness: Renaissance Humanists and the Revival of Classical Ethics', in *Zeichen – Rituale – Werte. Internationales Kolloquium des Sonderforschungsbereichs 496 an der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster*, ed. by G. Althoff (Münster: Rhema, 2004), pp. 55-68.

emphasised in Lodi Nauta's recent work, *In Defense of Common Sense*.¹⁷ Nauta's work has done much to place Valla in historical context, concentrating on the continuity between Valla's metaphysics and natural philosophy and those of Medieval and patristic authors. In this article, I should like to supplement Nauta's conclusions by considering Valla's moral philosophy, and, in particular, examining what Valla has to say about the question of pagan salvation. On this topic, *De voluptate* must be situated in the context of a series of long-running debates, stretching back to the Church Fathers themselves. Valla invokes patristic commentary to discuss the true value of pagan virtue, and to challenge the arguments of many of his humanist contemporaries.

For the two authors whom Valla cites as his models, the late antique Fathers Augustine and Lactantius, pagan virtue had been a particular problem. According to Valla, Augustine had (presumably referring to his *De civitate Dei*) 'confuted false religions' i.e. pagan practices, whilst Lactantius had illuminated the principles of the true religion.¹⁸ Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* (c.303-311) were particularly popular amongst fifteenth-century humanists, and for his ability to combine eloquence and Christian doctrine, Lactantius was dubbed the 'Christian Cicero'.¹⁹ Whilst the *Divine Institutes* had exhorted educated pagans to convert to Christianity, *De voluptate* discusses the issue of the 'virtuous pagan', that is, the fate in the afterlife of those who lived before and without knowledge of Christ. This question had been much discussed by medieval authors such as Peter Abelard and Thomas Aquinas, but received new impetus in an Italian cultural context due to the commentary tradition on Dante.²⁰ This commentary tradition prompted several questions on the relationship between classical philosophy and Christian

¹⁷ Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ *De voluptate*, I proemium [1] p. 49.

¹⁹ Charles L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), pp. 117-20.

²⁰ Peter Abelard, *Theologia Christiana*, ed. by E. M. Buytaert (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), II.xxiii-xxiv, II.cviii, pp. 142, 180; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 22 vols, trans. by English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1911-25), 3a, 89, 7, XXI, 34-6.

morality.²¹ This paper considers two aspects of Lorenzo Valla's thought on this complicated topic. Firstly, it asks whether Valla believed that worthy pagan heroes had merited a heavenly reward; secondly, it assesses the moral validity that Valla attached to classical literature.

Understanding Valla's answers to these questions is naturally important for what it suggests about his own attitudes to Christianity, attitudes on which modern scholars have found it hard to agree. Moreover, it has broader implications for how we conceptualise the relationship between theology and humanism in the quattrocento, and indeed for the uneasy alliance represented by the unfortunate term 'Christian Humanism' itself. Humanist theology was bequeathed a set of problems by medieval scholasticism, problems which could not simply be dismissed along with barbarous scholastic Latin.²² These are the problems with which Valla grapples in *De voluptate*.

The Virtuous Pagan

At the opening of *De voluptate*, Valla undertakes to discuss virtue, noting that the subject of religion had been sufficiently explored by Lactantius and Augustine. Yet, having made this assertion, he begins to discuss the fate in the afterlife of those who lived before Christ. This may seem a non sequitur, yet it is an entirely logical move. Valla is dealing with the confused question of whether those who professed a now demonstrably 'false' religion might be saved by virtue of their moral goodness. He takes aim at a group he dubs the *amatores gentilium*, those who believe that ancient pagans might have achieved salvation:

There are quite a few people and (even more shamefully) learned men, with whom I have often talked, who ask and inquire: why is it that many of the ancients...who either did

²¹ Steven Botterill, 'The Trecento Commentaries on Dante's *Commedia*', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. by Alistair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 590-611.

²² For example, Aquinas had offered a somewhat positive interpretation of *voluptas* in his *Summa Theologica*, 1a 2ae 27, 1 (English Dominicans, VI, 319-20).

not know or did not venerate God as we do, are said not only to be excluded from the celestial city but also to be cast out into the hellish night?²³

The question at stake in *De voluptate*, then, is how far virtue can be separated from religious practice. If a man who lived before Christ can be described as ‘honest and just’ in his actions, then it is but a small step to describing him as possessed of ‘faith and piety’. The dialogue addresses the intersection between the ‘righteous’ pagan, who might be morally ‘good’, and the ‘virtuous’ pagan, possessed of the *sanctitas* that will entitle him, even if living before Christ, to salvation.

Traditionally, imitation of ‘ethical’ pagan behaviour had been considered useful to the Christian believer, primarily as a spur to good works.²⁴ This was embodied in the oft-quoted maxim that ‘the lives of others are our teachers’.²⁵ The medieval tradition, particularly the *Accessus ad auctores*, the introductions to classical literature, stressed the correlation between *dicta* and *facta*, the lives of the philosophers being living embodiments of their teaching.²⁶

By the early fifteenth century, however, the rediscovery of texts and humanist biographical efforts were highlighting some disturbing incongruities between the precepts of pagan philosophers and their behaviour. Seneca had prescribed a life of austerity, but Juvenal, Tacitus and Quintilian suggested he had lived in rather un-philosophic opulence.²⁷ Biographical detail threatened to undermine the philosophers’ moralising. The humanist and politician, Giannozzo

²³ *De voluptate*, I proemium [3] p. 49.

²⁴ Augustine, *On the City of God*, trans. by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), i.24, pp. 36-7.

²⁵ *Proverbia Sententiaeque Latinitatis Medii Aevi: Lateinische Sprichörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters in alphabetischer Anordnung*, 5 vols, ed. by Hans Walther (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963-67), no.11529.

²⁶ For the *accessus* tradition see *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-1375: The Commentary Tradition*, ed. by A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott (Oxford, 1988), pp. 12-15.

²⁷ Marc Laureys, ‘Quintilian’s Judgement of Seneca and the Scope and Purpose of *Inst.* 10.1’, *Antike und Abendland* (1991), 37, 100–25.

Manetti (c.1396-1459) had recognised this problem, and in his biography of Seneca addressed Quintilian's criticism of the Stoic philosopher. Manetti maintained that Quintilian, another Spanish orator competing for the limelight, had slandered Seneca out of oratorical envy, not because of his lifestyle.²⁸ Leonardo Bruni, Valla's friend and mentor, essayed a different approach in his *Life of Aristotle*, when considering how the Stagirite's deeds related to his teachings on the moral life. Bruni asserted that the manner in which Aristotle had lived was far less important than his excellent precepts.²⁹ In *De voluptate*, Valla delivers an implicit rebuke to Bruni's defence of the philosopher. Valla argues that Aristotle's mode of death tells Christians all they needed to know about his life. He recounts the legend that Aristotle, when he finally encountered a concept he could not comprehend, committed suicide by casting himself into the river Euripus. Aristotle's death provided a salutary lesson on the dangers of pagan philosophy, for the supposedly wise philosopher was 'turned into a madman by immoderate greed for knowledge'.³⁰

Yet Valla does much more than pick out individual philosophers and scrutinise their behaviour. He attacks the entire edifice of classical literature, engaging with a millennium-old question. The standard patristic argument, as formulated by Augustine, held that pagan philosophers were motivated solely by love of glory, and that desire for fame obscured their desire to be ethically righteous.³¹ Many humanist scholars attempted to bridge the gulf between actions motivated by desire for glory and those done for love of virtue. The 'secular immortality' bestowed by fame was validated when cast as a 'reward' for virtue. On this basis, the political theorist Quentin

²⁸ Manetti, *Life of Seneca*, trans. by Stefano Ugo Baldassarri, *Biographical Writings* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 235.

²⁹ Bruni, *Life of Aristotle*, trans. by Gordon Griffiths, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Library and Studies, 1987), pp. 288-9.

³⁰ *De voluptate*, 2.XXVIII.19 p.207; the legend is ultimately derived from Gregory Nazianzus. The criticism is repeated in Valla's *De libero arbitrio*, trans. by Charles Trinkaus, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer and others (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 181.

³¹ Augustine, *City of God*, V.xii-xxi (Dyson, pp. 207-28).

Skinner has argued that the quattrocento formulated a more sympathetic understanding of *fama*, wherein honour, glory and worldly fame became legitimate and admirable aims.³²

Certainly many of Valla's contemporaries believed that the morally virtuous would rightly be rewarded with earthly fame and glory, as Pier Paolo Vergerio asserted: 'just as profit and pleasure are laid down as ends for illiberal intellects, so virtue and glory are goals for the noble'.³³ This 'rehabilitation' of earthly fame culminated in the early fifteenth century in Francesco da Fiano's defence of the pagan poets, *Contra ridiculos oblocutores et detractores poetarum* (c.1404).³⁴ In an invective dedicated to the future Innocent VII, Fiano argued that the motivation of the Church Fathers did not substantially differ from that of the poets.³⁵ Even Augustine and Jerome had desired earthly fame:

Though they were saints, they were human beings as well; and since we are all drawn to the desire for glory by our human nature as if by a hook, I am convinced that they, too, at one time or other were inflamed by an ardent desire for praise and a name amongst men.³⁶

De voluptate offers a response to such humanist attempts to bond virtue to fame. Valla's Epicurean begins the discussion by asserting that pagan authors were motivated by fame, and fame alone:

³² Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), I, 100.

³³ Vergerio, *The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth*, trans. Craig Kallendorf, *Humanist Educational Treatises* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 29.

³⁴ M. L. Plaisant, 'Un opuscolo inedito di Francesco da Fiano in difesa della poesia', *Rinascimento* 1 (1961), 119-62.

³⁵ See Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).

³⁶ Fiano, trans. by Baron in *Crisis*, p. 303.

I ask what the poets wished to obtain with so much toil by day and night? Certainly they wished to become famous, not virtuous but famous – and all of them acknowledged that they strove for this.³⁷

This argument then develops into a broader consideration of the desires which compel men to study:

Quite often I am so tired of studies, so exhausted, so vexed, that I am nearly ill in soul and body [...]. Who, may I ask, would apply himself to literary studies, induced by the delights of contemplation alone?³⁸

The Epicurean Vegio asserts that whilst contemplation is often tiresome, men endure it for the anticipated recompense of praise and fame.³⁹ Significantly, however, the Epicurean interlocutor never goes as far as to suggest that fame is a *reward* for virtue, as some of Valla's contemporaries might have done: rather he believes that fame is more 'real' and valuable than virtue, because fame alone can provide pleasure.

By contrast, Valla's Christian orator, Antonio da Rho, does not deny the reality of virtue, but rejects the supposed correlation between righteous behaviour and earthly reward for such behaviour. Boethius, the sixth-century author of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, is attacked for his simplistic contention that the evil are always miserable and the virtuous always happy.⁴⁰ This is not the case, as the biblical story of Job demonstrates – the good often live in misery. Antonio da Rho asserts that merits do not always find earthly reward: 'it is indeed possible to see many most

³⁷ *De voluptate*, II.xi [4] p. 163.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, II.xxviii [14-5] pp. 203-5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I.xxxiii [1] p. 115.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, III.xiii [1-3] pp. 269-71; Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by V. Watts (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), IV.iv, pp. 96-101.

contemptible and pernicious men loaded down with riches, honours and power'.⁴¹ There is no correlation between virtue and worldly honour, a conclusion which is not challenged by his interlocutors.

How, then, do we explain what motivated the Fathers of the Church in their writings? The solution is provided by the Christian orator with reference to St Paul. Paul's toils were not pleasurable, but he did not endure them out of a desire for earthly glory. Rather he wrote in the hope of heavenly reward, and was fortified to complete his task through the infusion of divine grace.⁴² No comparison, Antonio da Rho explains, can be drawn between the motivations of Christian and pagan authors, and, moreover, texts written out of a desire for glory cannot provide instruction in virtue.

If Christian and pagan works derive from dissimilar motivations, should we also expect those works to count towards a different *finis*? What, if any, reward, did pagan behaviour merit, if it was not founded on virtue? Valla's model, Augustine, whilst denying absolutely the possibility of pagan salvation and ridiculing Roman acts of 'virtue', could not quite resist giving a measure of approval to the Romans: 'God aided the Romans in achieving the glory of so great an empire; for they were good men according to the lights of the earthly city'.⁴³ Augustine excused the Romans who, on this earth, gained the rewards they deserved in temporal lordship, a blessing from God who provided for the expansion of their empire. Dante, following Eusebius and Orosius, had stretched this further in his *Monarchy*, proclaiming the Roman Empire was part of God's providential plan: their empire was the direct result of their virtue.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *De voluptate*, III.xxv [8] p. 309.

⁴² *Ibid.*, III.viii [4] p. 263.

⁴³ Augustine, *City of God*, V.xix (Dyson, p. 225).

⁴⁴ Dante, *Monarchy*, trans. by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 50-8; on Roman glory as a reward for virtue see Salutati, *De seculo et religione*, ed. by B. L. Ullman (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1957), II.x, pp. 134-5.

There are tensions within *De voluptate* which are not easily resolved on this issue. Even after the Epicurean orator has claimed that Roman heroes acted out of sheer self-interest, in pursuit of pleasure, he still attempts to present their glory as virtuous, for, ‘they would bring injustice to none and aid to many [...]. No people in all the world can be compared with the Romans for the glory of their virtues or the greatness of their power’.⁴⁵

Elsewhere, however, Valla had himself expressed doubts about whether the establishment of empire should be seen as a divinely-granted ‘reward’ for virtue. Do we see him torn between his loyalties as both a Christian and a ‘Roman’, or simply demonstrating the flexibility typical of an orator? In his treatise on the Donation of Constantine, Valla, challenging the idea that any land annexed by the Roman Empire could be transferred to papal control, scorned the myth of primitive, virtuous Rome:

You say to me ‘the Romans justly waged war upon nations and they justly deprived them of liberty’ [...]. Yet no offence could have been so serious as to warrant peoples’ everlasting slavery, since they have often waged wars through the fault of a prince or some great citizen in the state, and then, after being defeated, were undeservedly penalised with slavery.⁴⁶

We find the same critique in *De voluptate*: Roman dominion was not providentially ordained, and Roman ‘victories’ are nothing compared to the victories of the Israelites. Christian glory is greater because it is achieved over eternal, demonic enemies, and therefore qualitatively different.⁴⁷ Again, Valla constructs the difference between virtuous and immoral behaviour according to the desire that motivates such action: achieving glory for oneself or glorying in the

⁴⁵ *De voluptate*, II.xx [1] p. 179.

⁴⁶ Valla, *On the False Donation of Constantine*, trans. by Glen W. Bowersock (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), V [87], p. 143.

⁴⁷ *De voluptate*, III.xxii [1] p. 291.

work of God. In short, only action motivated by virtuous desires can win heavenly reward. *De voluptate* even dismisses the idea that pagans would desire such salvation at all: they are satisfied with only earthly rewards. The ‘Epicurean’ Vegio avers: ‘if they offered us [Epicureans] the Elysian Fields, I should consider it most foolish to give up certain goods for uncertain ones’.⁴⁸

Valla’s conclusion asserts that pagans attained all that they desired: they were rewarded in the only currency that had value to them, in earthly glory. Christians should not lament that those who never believed in a Christian afterlife did not achieve it. *De voluptate* explains that through a ‘kind of madness’, blind love of fame, and mental fraud, the philosophers truly could believe themselves to be ‘happy inside the bull of Phalaris’. The image, drawn from Cicero, of the Stoic sage for whom nothing else existed except virtue, and who could therefore be happy even whilst in bodily torment, roasting inside the bronze bull of the legendary tyrant Phalaris, is extended to describe *all* pagan philosophers.⁴⁹ Unable to conceive of the Christian afterlife, the philosophers never desired it: yet they may still be judged according to Christian doctrine, and on this basis, Valla has no hesitation in casting them out ‘into the hellish night’.⁵⁰

Valla thus denies that any comparison can be made between pagan falsehood and revealed truth. On this reading it cannot be argued that Epicurean philosophy comes closer to Christian truth than Stoicism, for both philosophies lacked any conception of the proper *finis* of man.⁵¹ Lactantius had similarly denied all possible points of contact between philosophy and Christian religion, dismissing the stories that Plato or any other philosopher gained access to Jewish holy books, and thus indirect knowledge of revealed truth.⁵² Valla’s assertion that without Christ there

⁴⁸ Ibid., II.xxxi [7] p. 221.

⁴⁹ Ibid., III.viii [2] p. 263; Cicero, *De finibus*, trans. by H. Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1971), V.xviii.85, pp. 488-89.

⁵⁰ *De voluptate*, I proemium [3] p. 49.

⁵¹ Cf. Lorch, ‘A Defense of the Senses’, pp. 121-22.

⁵² Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* IV.ii, trans. by Antony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), pp. 226-27.

can be no virtue, because predicated on false beliefs, is thus far from surprising. Yet his denial of ethical value to ancient moral systems is striking when compared to Bruni's defence of Aristotle and Plato. Asked whether those philosophers had been good men, Bruni replied: 'did they live according to their own custom? As if indeed virtue and moral seriousness were not the same as they are now!'⁵³ For Valla, virtue had indeed always been the same, but it had never been known to Aristotle or Plato.

The Golden Age and Poetic Allegory

Valla dismantled one scheme of history, the myth of virtuous republican Rome and its heroes. He has an alternative historical narrative in mind: the notion of a lost 'golden age'. The golden age was a potent and powerful concept in the century after Valla, most notably featuring in Giles of Viterbo's panegyrics celebrating Pope Julius II, under whose rule it was said that the golden days returned to Rome.⁵⁴ Valla, however, does not celebrate a 'renewed' golden age, but instead locates it in the distant past: 'before the Cretan king [Jupiter] held sceptre, and before a godless race banqueted on slaughtered bullocks [...] golden Saturn lived on earth'.⁵⁵ Yet this wistful invocation of a pre-Christian era of bounty raises further questions: how can Valla accommodate such a golden age into a Christian scheme of history?

The mythology of the golden age derives from classical literature and a commentary tradition which runs from Macrobius to Benvenuto da Imola. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* had described a pastoral idyll in which the earth provided for all men's needs.⁵⁶ A similar idyll was depicted by Virgil, who presented the ruler Saturn as an inventor who had civilised the natives of Latium by

⁵³ Bruni, *Isagoge*, trans. Griffiths, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, pp. 272-73.

⁵⁴ Charles L. Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 293-309; John W. O'Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform: A Study in Renaissance Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 101-17.

⁵⁵ Virgil, *Georgics*, 2 vols, trans. by H. R. Fairclough (London: Heinemann, 1916), II, lines 532-40, I 174-75.

⁵⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2 vols, trans. by Frank Justus Miller (London: Heinemann, 1977), I, lines 113-143, II, 8-11.

imparting laws and teaching them agriculture. Saturn's role as the improver of human life was often elided with that of other mythic figures, particularly Orpheus, whose music taught men how to communicate and persuaded them to form the first communities.⁵⁷ According to this classical narrative, it was only when Saturn was overthrown by the tyrannous Jupiter that this golden age for mankind came to an end, and society descended into warfare and injustice.

Later medieval commentators had attempted to fit the golden age within Christian scheme of history. They equated the arrival of a second, renewed golden age with the Coming of Christ and the beginnings of Christian worship. They pointed to Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*, in which the poet had 'foretold' the birth of a glorious child which would transport the *aurea saecula* from the past to the future, restoring human harmony.⁵⁸ The birth of this miracle child would usher in the restoration of human society. Some humanist authors, like Leonardo Bruni, believed that Virgil had prophesied the coming of Christ.⁵⁹ Other commentators were more circumspect: Benvenuto da Imola, the fourteenth-century Bolognese scholar of Virgil noted that, concerning the identity of the child, 'these words of Virgil's are ambiguous'.⁶⁰ Virgil might only have referred to the birth of Augustus, not Christ. Thus Valla's interpretation of the golden age and Virgil's prophetic powers presents an excellent opportunity to appraise his attitude towards pagan poetry, and its compatibility with Christian theology.

At this point it is worth considering Lactantius' position on the golden age, Valla's model. Lactantius had followed the classical tradition, but inflected it with monotheistic sentiments. The rule of Saturn, he argued, was a period in which worship of the one, true God had flourished:

⁵⁷ Cicero, *De inventione*, trans. by H. M. Hubell (London: Heinemann, 1949), I.ii, pp. 6-9.

⁵⁸ Virgil, *Eclogue IV*, lines 5-19 (trans. Fairclough, I, 48-51).

⁵⁹ Bruni, *The Study of Literature* 22, in Kallendorf, *Educational Treatises*, p. 115.

⁶⁰ M. L. Lord, 'The Commentary on Virgil's *Eclogues* by Benvenuto da Imola', *Euphrosyne*, 22 (1994), 373-401 (pp. 391-2).

This is not to be treated as poetical fiction but as truth. When Saturn was king, the worship of gods had not yet been instituted and no nation was yet committed to a view of divine status, God was certainly being worshipped. Hence the lack of discord and of enmity or war.⁶¹

The essential feature of Lactantius' golden age is justice, the subject to which he devotes the entire fifth book of the *Divine Institutes*. Lactantius' definition of justice is striking: it means to offer due worship to the Christian God, i.e. the practice of Christian monotheism.⁶²

In *De voluptate*, the golden age is adduced by both Stoic and Epicurean orators in order to vindicate their respective moral philosophies. For the Stoic Catone, the golden age is proof that man requires a civilising influence, because human society naturally tends to disorder and turmoil.⁶³ Saturn is celebrated as a law-giver, a ruler who brought order and stability.⁶⁴ Conversely, the Epicurean Vegio characterises the golden age as a time in which men learned to take a delight in living.⁶⁵ Vegio's golden age is exemplified by indulgence: the figure of Saturn is almost dwarfed by veneration of Bacchus. There is no mention of 'justice': it is a period recognised as good because of mass enjoyment of pleasure. More strikingly, the golden age is not located in any precise time-frame; there is no mention of man falling away from it or of the end of Saturn's reign. By adopting an Epicurean lifestyle, men can return to it today.⁶⁶

Finally, Antonio da Rho, the Christian orator, propounds a third vision of the golden age in his closing sermon. He provides a critique of the Epicurean golden age and, like Lactantius, adapts

⁶¹ *Divine Institutes*, V.v.1-7 (Bowen, p. 291).

⁶² *Ibid.*, V.vi.13 (Bowen, p. 294).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, I.ii [6-7] p. 59.

⁶⁴ For the golden age as a period of noble austerity see Boethius, *Consolation II*, met.v (Watts, pp. 36-37). For Salutati the golden age provided a model for monastic asceticism, *De fato et fortuna*, ed. by Concetta Bianca (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1985), XXXV.i-vi, pp. 80-81.

⁶⁵ *De voluptate*, I.xxiii [2] p. 103.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, II.xxix [5] p. 211.

the idea for Christian thought. The age was ‘golden’ because of its virtue. This narrative also provides another reason for explaining why those who lived before Christ fall short of salvation, and must be irretrievably condemned. Rho leans on Lactantius’ definition of the golden age as a period of ‘pagan monotheism’, arguing that there was a time when monotheistic virtue was known and practiced on earth. Yet at some point, sinful pagans allowed their knowledge of true religious practice to be lost, and it remained lost until the Incarnation:

There was from the beginning one set of criteria for observing divine requirements and another for earthly ones, men called the former the ‘rightful’ and the ‘virtues’, and the latter ‘expediency’. But with the irruption of false religions and the prevalence of the vices, the science of things divine fell into oblivion or was confined to very few people. Only the names of the virtues remained, preserving something of their pristine majesty because the memory of praiseworthy ancient deeds and sayings had not completely faded away. Yet the memory was like a shadow without substance.⁶⁷

Antonio da Rho argues that the pagans had known, in some fashion, the basic tenets of monotheistic virtue, but let their virtue slip. Thus, as the knowledge of those virtuous actions necessary for a right relationship with God had existed on earth since creation, it becomes just – even necessary – to condemn pagan failings. The philosophers, the supposedly ‘righteous’ pagans, are doubly condemned. Having lost knowledge of the truth, they fell into error and could never recapture virtue. In Augustinian terms, they lost sight of the proper object of their love: God.⁶⁸ In the third book of *De voluptate*, lack of knowledge means loss of virtue and the absence of justice. To interpret the golden age as nothing more than a celebration of pleasure, as the Epicureans do, is to misread salvation history.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *De voluptate*, III.ix [1] p. 265.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *City of God* XIX.xxi (Dyson, pp. 950-52).

⁶⁹ *De voluptate*, I.xlvii [3] p. 131.

Antonio da Rho's reading of the golden age as the benevolent rule of Saturn over a monotheistic society has important corollaries for the interpretation of the role of the poets in *De voluptate*. Valla endorses a 'euhemerist' reading in which Bacchus, Orpheus, Saturn and others represent men deified by memory, revered for the gifts they bestowed upon mankind, such as agriculture, architecture and painting.⁷⁰ If we understand that the 'gods' of the poets were merely great and powerful kings, then their poems do contain some truth at the historical level.⁷¹ This argument that the poets created gods from mere men is, of course, no innovation: Valla borrows the civilising myth of Orpheus from Horace and Cicero, and a euhemerist interpretation of pagan mythology is adopted by Lactantius.⁷² Pagan poetry could be explained when situated in its proper historical context. Valla, however, was further concerned to explore the moral and religious usefulness of those texts.

De voluptate engages with a debate begun in the fourteenth century over the status of the *poeta theologus*. The debate stemmed from two alternative readings of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: book three of the *Metaphysics* could be read as sanctioning the pagan poets as the first 'theologians', whose works explored divine ideas under a covering of allegory.⁷³ Following the stricter reading of Aristotle propounded by Aquinas, however, the poets could be described simply as 'liars', ignorant of all true divinity.⁷⁴

Whilst many humanists were keen to defend the status of ancient poets as theologians, a difficult question remained – in what sense could they be said to have possessed knowledge of the

⁷⁰ Valla probably derives this euhemerist approach from Augustine, *City of God*, vi.5-9 (Dyson, pp. 246-60).

⁷¹ *De voluptate*, I.xxiii [2] p. 103; II.xxvi [14] p. 193; II.xxviii [14] p. 203.

⁷² *Divine Institutes*, XI.xxxiii-lxv (Bowen, pp. 83-7).

⁷³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by H.G. Apostle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966). A.2.35-6, pp. 15-16.

⁷⁴ Aquinas, *Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. by Raimondo Spiazzi (Torino: Marietti, 1964), I.iii.63, p. 19.

divine? Did Virgil, Horace and Ovid enjoy the gift of prophecy, as suggested by Cicero's *Pro Archia*, which spoke of the poets as 'holy'?⁷⁵ Or, following the resolution arrived at by Petrarch and Salutati, did poets have only the 'natural' knowledge of theology which they arrived at through reason and the study of nature?⁷⁶

In *De voluptate*, Valla considers the status of the *poeta theologus* by examining the truth content of pagan poetry. The Christian orator, Rho, begins by attacking the theological content of poems. He disparages the vision of the afterlife propounded in the *Aeneid*:

Aeneas never really descended into Hades [...]. The reliability of this notion and Virgil's authority may be gauged by the circumstance, so frequently met with in other poets, in which he heaps highest praises on men who never existed.⁷⁷

The supernatural content of pagan poetics is sheer invention. Yet such a proposition – the absence of truth at a literal or historical level – does not necessarily rule out an interpretation of pagan poetry according to the rules of allegory set down by the fifth-century neo-Platonist Macrobius. Indeed, it is against the background of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* and *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* that this section of *De voluptate* must be read. Those two texts provided medieval readers with the conceptual tools for extracting philosophical truth from what appeared to be only poetic fictions. By reading on an allegorical level, penetrating the veils of fiction [*integumentum*], the *narratio fabulosa* could be forced to reveal hidden truths.⁷⁸ A narrative untrue on the literal or historical level, a fable, must be parsed for its real meaning.

⁷⁵ Cicero, *Pro Archia*, trans. by Nevile Watts (London: Heinemann, 1979), VIII.xviii, pp. 24-27.

⁷⁶ Ronald G. Witt, 'Coluccio Salutati and the Conception of the *Poeta Theologus* in the Fourteenth Century', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 30 (1977), 538-563.

⁷⁷ *De voluptate*, II.ix [4] p. 157.

⁷⁸ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. by W. H. Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), I.ii.1-13, pp. 83-85.

In *De voluptate* we witness Catone, the Stoic orator, dismissing the stories of the gods by calling them mere fables [*fabulae*].⁷⁹ One might expect the Epicurean to leap to the defence of pagan poetry by expounding those fables allegorically. Yet the Epicurean orator Vegio does not invoke the idea of allegory, but instead presents a simple and stark dichotomy: either the gods must be defended on the basis that they existed just as the poets described them; or else it must be said the gods are wholly invented. There can be no compromise, no middle way, no allegorical reading. This passage is partly a reworking of Cicero's *De natura deorum*, in which the academic orator, Cotta, denies that stories of pagan gods may be interpreted allegorically, as such allegories are based on false etymologies, selectively applied.⁸⁰ The same is true in *De voluptate*: even the advocate for pagan poetry cannot rely on allegory to mount a defence of the truth of pagan philosophy. As no interlocutor can accept pagan poetry as literally true, the debate over poetic allegory fizzles out, and the focus of the dialogue turns to the role of allegory in Scripture.

Closely related to the fifteenth-century debate over the *poeta theologus* was the question of whether poetic allegory should be accorded the same status as biblical allegory.⁸¹ The figure whom Valla selected as his Epicurean interlocutor, Maffeo Vegio, had defended this position, composing a 'supplement' to Virgil, a thirteenth book of the *Aeneid*, in order to transform the work into a Christian 'moral fable'.⁸² Vegio's *Supplement* concluded with Aeneas, the allegorical figuration of the virtuous soul, being translated to the stars, finally achieving his heavenly reward. Vegio explained his decision on the grounds that the *Aeneid* was a straightforward Christian allegory: 'if we substitute the word heaven for Latium and life for Troy, why might the passage not have come from the pen of the Apostle Paul?'⁸³

⁷⁹ *De voluptate*, I.xlvii [2] p. 131.

⁸⁰ Cicero, *De natura deorum* trans. by H. Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1979), III.xxiv.61, pp. 344-45.

⁸¹ For the background to this debate see Witt, 'Poeta Theologus', 559; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory*, pp. 466-68.

⁸² Vegio, *Supplement* (Putnam, *Short Epics*, pp. 2-41).

⁸³ A. Cox Brinton, *Maphaeus Vegius and his Thirteenth Book of the Aeneid* (New York: Garland, repr. 1978), p. 28.

Vegio's position represented a challenge to the orthodox dichotomy between Scripture and poetry established by Augustine. For Augustine, the Bible was true on a literal-historical basis: poetic fables, such as Aeneas' descent to Hades, were not.⁸⁴ Divinely-inspired biblical allegories belonged to a privileged category, and should not be lumped together with poetic fiction.⁸⁵ Valla goes one step further than Augustine: his orators are suspicious of all allegorising interpretations, even in expounding the Bible. Thus the Christian orator Rho asserts:

Anyone trying to examine and clarify these [biblical] allegories and riddles will labour completely in vain. Our face cannot be freed from its covering, which is the flesh.⁸⁶

Valla's Christian orator is uncompromising: he recognises that such 'veils' of allegory are present in Scripture, but denies they can be penetrated. Whilst pagan allegories possess no truth whatsoever, the truth of biblical allegories defies human understanding. The concept of the *poeta theologus* is entirely discredited, and the fundamental division between Holy Scripture and pagan poetry preserved.

Conclusion

Previous interpreters of *De voluptate* have been correct: this is a radical work. It is radical in the true sense of that term, representing a return to patristic roots. Valla's interest in the lives of the pagan philosophers and the allegorical value of pagan poetry is motivated by a concern for Christian questions of salvation. The endurance of pagan *fama* and pagan poetry, he explains, must not be mistaken for an endorsement of their moral value. Nor could pagan authors be excused from judgement of their virtue by pleading their unwitting ignorance of righteous

⁸⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), III.v-ix, pp. 73-75.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. by E. Hill (New York: New City Press, 1995), XV.xv, pp. 406-07.

⁸⁶ *De voluptate*, III.xix [1] p. 289.

Christian morality: according to Valla's mythology, pre-Christian society had once known the monotheism which might have led it to salvation, but had ultimately rejected it.

Whilst the extent to which any of Valla's contemporaries, the 'learned men' he attacks in his *proemium*, envisaged Plato or Aristotle being offered a place in paradise is questionable,⁸⁷ Valla trades in absolutes: either one must deny the connection between morally right behaviour and salvation, or one must deny the validity of any non-Christian moral philosophy. This leads him to prefer Lactantius to Cicero, and privilege the firm pronouncements of Augustine over the ambiguities of Dante. For such a complex figure, Valla is candid about the relationship between Christianity and classical philosophy:

To that world I concede humane letters, the study of doctrines and – always most important – eloquence; I deny, however, that the ancients arrived at wisdom and the knowledge of true virtue.⁸⁸

This is not the world of Ficino's harmonisation of pagan and Christian thought, which emerged only decades later.⁸⁹ *De voluptate* maintains that those pagans had missed their chance, lost their golden age: the dignity of man would not be restored to him by Cicero, but only in heaven.

⁸⁷ Cf. L.A. Panizza, 'Seneca, Pagan or Christian?', *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres*, (1984), 2, 47-98.

⁸⁸ *De voluptate*, III.vii [5] p. 261.

⁸⁹ See Anthony Levi, 'Ficino, Augustine and the Pagans', in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. by Michael J. B. Allen and others (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 99-113.

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