

“WHY KRISTELLER?” – ONCE AGAIN

(Preliminary paper)

When on 10 December 1991 Paul Oskar Kristeller was about to give the Italian Academy's inaugural lecture and founding director Maristella Lorch raised the question “Why Kristeller?” in her opening remarks, she could take it for granted that the audience knew who the man was she had invited. In view of her actual concern, the new academy's mission amid an ongoing crisis of American and European academia, she praised him as a “role model for learning and scholarship as well as for living life honorably within a university”.¹ On top of that a few personal memories and a brief hint on his main field of study, Renaissance Humanism – that must have been enough at that time. The man was no stranger to the house.

By then, Kristeller had been living only two blocks down on Amsterdam for more than half a century. Earlier still, when he arrived in New York for an unsecure teaching position at Columbia University in September 1939, he found his first lodging in the Casa Italiana where Giuseppe Prezzolini, Chairman of the Italian Department and director of the Casa, offered him room and board as well as a small salary.² It was a gentle place of refuge for the German-Jewish exile who just had his second emigration behind him; when he moved out in June 1940 it was to move in with his newly wed wife Edith, an old acquaintance from Germany who had to flee the country for the same reasons. Now 86 and emeritus, Kristeller didn't fail to mention his longtime connection with the Casa with gratitude before he began his inaugural lecture. This lecture, “On Learning and scholarship”, proved to be identical to his already published Haskins Lecture from the year before – yet another autobiographical retrospect by someone showing a notable inclination to this genre, by a scholar not only self-reflective, but also self-confident when it came to his idea of scholarship. Stripped off its more concrete and practical aspects, this idea amounted to the concept of “scholarship for its own sake” as opposed to the academic “pursuit of personal or political goals” which Kristeller saw to be at work in the wake of the “cultural revolution” since the 1960's.³

¹ Maristella Lorch, „Why Kristeller?“ (Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, December 10 [1991]), 2. The typescript can be found in Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Paul Oskar Kristeller Papers (RBML, POK Papers), Box 78.

² See Barbara Faedda, *From Da Ponte to the Casa Italiana: A Brief History of Italian Studies at Columbia University*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 41.

³ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *A Life of Learning. Charles Homer Haskins Lecture*, New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1990, 12 and 14. See the two introductory paragraphs of his Italian Academy lecture “On Lecture and Scholarship” in: RBML, POK Papers, Box 125.

Thirty years later, it might be of some interest to reflect on this scholarly ideal, once inaugurating the Italian Academy's lecture series, from a historical perspective. In my talk I will first report on my current archival research in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library and then try to shed light on some of the motives which lay behind Kristeller's concept of scholarship and his objective of a "new humanistic reaction".⁴

To give an elementary outline of his academic profile and historical significance is the purpose of this pre-paper.

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Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905-1999) ranks among the leading historians of Renaissance Philosophy and Renaissance Humanism.⁵ His numerous writings and editions have enhanced and, at the same time, contested the general understanding of this decisive period of transformation in Italian and European cultural history which since the 19th century, when Jacob Burckhardt ascribed to it the birth of the modern individual, has served as a central point of reference of Western self-conception.

While Kristeller's intellectual profile was shaped by three national academic cultures it also shows him at a unique intersection of different, in part conflicting, philosophical traditions, with Neo-Kantianism and Existentialism being the two opposite poles of the spectrum. Born in Berlin in 1905 to well-off secular Jewish parents, he fell to the charms of late German Philhellenism at his high school, a *Humanistisches Gymnasium* whose staff included several young teachers of Greek and Latin who would later become renown university professors, among them his later Ph.D. advisor, the Plato scholar Ernst Hoffmann. Studying Philosophy, History, Mathematics, and Classics at the universities of Heidelberg, Marburg, Freiburg, and Berlin, Kristeller got acquainted with a long row of still famous thinkers and scholars among his professors as well as among his fellow students, with the philosopher Martin Heidegger probably being the one who left the most long-lasting personal impression on him. After finishing his philosophical doctorate on Plotinus' concept of the soul in Heidelberg (1928)⁶ and the Prussian teachers' state exam in Greek and Latin in Berlin (1931), he began working for his *Habilitation* (second thesis) with Heidegger in Freiburg on the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). The Nazis' takeover put an end not only to

⁴ Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Preface", id., *Renaissance Thought II. Papers on Humanism and the Arts*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961, VI-X, IX.

⁵ See Thomas Gilbhard, *Bibliographia Kristelleriana. A Bibliography of the Publications of Paul Oskar Kristeller, 1929 – 1999*, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2006. While a full-scale biography is still missing the seminal collected volume remains *Kristeller Reconsidered. Essays on His Life and Scholarship*, ed. John Monfasani, New York: Italica Press, 2006.

⁶ Cf. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Der Begriff der Seele in der Ethik des Plotin*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1929.

this special collaboration, but to Kristeller's academic career in Germany as a whole. That it would have come up to a career under different political circumstances can be guessed by the reference letters he had collected before he left Germany for Italy in early 1934: Besides by Heidegger himself he was recommended by the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Richard Kroner (each having suffered under Heidegger's uprising in his own way) and, on the side of the Classical Philologists, not only by Hoffmann, but also by Werner Jaeger und Eduard Norden.

The five years in Italy, where he already had explored the ground during a longer journey in spring 1933, were formative for Kristeller's life and academic outlook.⁷ It was in Italy that he turned into a "hunter of manuscripts" (as he called himself much later) and laid the ground for becoming a Renaissance scholar in the proper sense, taking in view the cultural-historical period as such to which his initial interest in Platonism had brought him. First staying in Rome, he soon began to work as a teacher in the Landschulheim in Florence, a private high school for children of German Jewish refugees, until, in the spring of 1935, he accepted an appointment as a lecturer in German language and literature at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, which was offered to him by its director Giovanni Gentile. Gentile, the leading Fascist intellectual of the day, turned out to be Kristeller's main patron in Italy and did a lot to promote the émigré's research in which he had a genuine philosophical interest of his own. The young German scholar's ticket to the realm of Fascist Italy's academic establishment was his strenuous work on the *Supplementum Ficinianum*, an edition of all the unpublished Ficino-manuscripts he could locate. Published already in 1937 in two volumes by Leo Olschki under the auspices of the Scuola (and earning him a second philosophical doctorate there), it appeared wholly in Latin, including Kristeller's introduction and annotations, with the only exception being Gentile's Italian preface. While Gentile couldn't spare Kristeller the consequences of Mussolini's racial laws of 1938, he kept supporting him in the difficult process of preparing his emigration to the US. The emigration itself was first and foremost made possible, though, by two Professors of Yale University, the Germanist Hermann Weigand, and Roland Bainton, the Director of the Divinity School, who invited him to New Haven for the spring term of 1939.

Columbia University proved to be the place where Kristeller could finally pursue his academic career unimpeded by racist persecution. And although it took him another ten years until he became a professor of philosophy it proved to be a career as successful as it could get, with all the honors, memberships, and prizes within the reach of an American Renaissance scholar. While he

⁷ Cf John Tedeschi, „Paul Oskar Kristeller: The Italian Years (1933-1939)“, id., *Intelletuali in Esilio. Dall'inquisizione romana al fascismo*, ed. Giorgio Caravale and Stefania Pastore, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2012, 385-416; Hans Peter Obermayer, *Deutsche Altertumswissenschaftler im amerikanischen Exil. Eine Rekonstruktion*, Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2014, 405-501; John Monfasani, „Italy in the Career of Paul Oskar Kristeller“, ed. Andrea Albrecht, Lutz Danneberg and Simone de Angelis, *Die akademische „Achse Berlin-Rom“? Der wissenschaftliche Austausch zwischen Italien und Deutschland 1920 bis 1945*, Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2017, 83-103.

was naturalized in 1945, his early reputation as a Renaissance scholar was promoted not least by Arthur Lovejoy's *Journal of the History of Ideas* (JHI) which was founded in 1940. Showing a marked proclivity for Renaissance thought, the new journal offered a welcome medium to the newcomer on the American scene who would contribute to it on a regular, more or less yearly basis well into the 1950s. The journal's third issue of 1940 saw Kristeller's second English publication⁸, "The Theory of Immortality in Marsilio Ficino", a kind of preview to the English version of his monograph *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*. This book came out three years later (with the Italian version published in 1953, and the German original, completed in 1937, only in 1972) and shortly afterwards received a long and friendly review in the JHI by no other than the late Ernst Cassirer.⁹ What he had once begun as a *Habilitationsschrift* remained Kristeller's last monograph proper, his following books being collections of essays and lectures, mostly on Renaissance philosophers, but also on the cultural history of Renaissance humanism in Italy.

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Regarding the general question of "the Renaissance", Kristeller expressed his critical position already in 1943, when he deplored the "tendency of many scholars to take the Renaissance as an imaginary battle-ground on which to fight out contemporary political, social and ideological conflicts, or as a test case for the solution of such meta-historical questions as the possibility and the causes of historical change". On the other hand, there would seem to be "no doubt about the distinctive physiognomy of the Renaissance" and no need for a "brief definition", a "tentative" one being enough. And for him "classical humanism was, if not the only, certainly the most characteristic and pervasive intellectual current of that period".¹⁰ Now while Kristeller's concept of Renaissance humanism corresponded pretty much with that of the Renaissance humanists, it differed from that of many of his contemporaries inside and outside of Renaissance studies. "In present discourse", he stated in 1954, "almost any kind of concern with human values is called 'humanistic', and consequently a great variety of thinkers, religious or antireligious, scientific or antiscientific, lay claim to what has become a rather elusive label of praise".¹¹

⁸ The first one was „Florentine Platonism and its Relations with Humanism and Scholasticism", *Church History* 8 (1939) 3, 201-211.

⁹ Ernst Cassirer, „Ficino's Place in Intellectual History", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (1945) 4, 483-501.

¹⁰ Paul Oskar Kristeller, „The Place of Classical Humanism in Renaissance Thought", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1943) 1, 59-63.

¹¹ Id., „The Humanist Movement" (1954), id., *Renaissance Thought. The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*, New York: Harper & Row 1961, 3-23, 8.

Renaissance's "humanism" became Kristeller's main academic battleground, on which he fought against the conceptual confusion and for the historical meaning of the term, for what it had really stood for in Renaissance Italy. Kristeller drew on the historical usage of "humanista" as teachers of the *studia humanitatis*, "a clearly defined cycle of scholarly disciplines, namely grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy", whereas "the study of each of these subjects was understood to include the reading and interpretation of its standard ancient writers in Latin and, to a lesser extent, in Greek." The conceptual confusion concerned his own special field of research, Renaissance philosophy whose still strongly medieval character besides its new turn to Platonism he didn't tire to stress. Even though the two great Renaissance philosophers, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, were humanists themselves, Kristeller claimed Renaissance humanism to have been "not as such a philosophical tendency or system, but rather a cultural and educational program which emphasized and developed an important but limited area of studies".¹² While it would be historically incorrect to mix it up with a "common 'philosophy of the Renaissance'" (whose existence Kristeller challenged already in 1941¹³) for the sake of constructing a philosophy of human values at the gate of the modern era, it would also distort the character of Renaissance humanism which merely meant "the general tendency of the age to attach the greatest importance to classical studies, and to consider classical antiquity as the common standard and model by which to guide all cultural activities".¹⁴ In other words, Kristeller embraced Renaissance Humanism for its antiquity, not for its modernity.

With his somehow demythologizing assessment, based on an astonishing erudition and an extensive manuscript research in numerous Italian archives and libraries (and a rather rigid concept of philosophy as well), Kristeller not only bereaved himself of the opportunity to bring his studies in line with the discourse on "humanism" which gained currency after WWII. He also proved to be an academic killjoy for the efforts of others who tried to trace their modern values back to the Renaissance. This concerned not only colleagues like Eugenio Garin¹⁵ and Hans Baron¹⁶, but in a way also his deceased supporter and collaborator Ernst Cassirer.¹⁷ The Kristeller-thesis has remained a stumbling block for anyone with an interest in depicting Renaissance Italy as a "harbinger of modernity" rather than as "the culmination of the ancient and medieval past".¹⁸

¹² Ibid., 10 f.

¹³ Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall, Jr., „The Study of the Philosophies of the Renaissance”, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1941) 4, 449-496, 440.

¹⁴ Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance", *Renaissance Thought*, 92-119, 94.

¹⁵ Cf. Eugenio Garin, *Der italienische Humanismus*. Bern: Francke, 1947; id., *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, transl. Peter Munz, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965.

¹⁶ Cf. Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*. Princeton, 1955.

¹⁷ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*. Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1927.

¹⁸ Robert Black, "Kristeller and His Critics: Celenza, Rubini, Maxson, and Baker on Renaissance Humanism", *History of the Humanities* 4 (2019) 1, 155-177, 177.

Kristeller's second main thesis, concerning the concept of Art, had a likewise sobering effect in this regard (while transcending the field of Renaissance studies). It was the subject of his classic, probably most famous study on "The Modern System of the Arts" which was first published in the JHI in 1951 and 1952, then reprinted and translated for several times. The concept of Art or the Arts with a big A, so he stated, would be founded on the system of the five major arts: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry. And this assembly was a modern one, never conceived in history before the 18th century. The ancient lack of aesthetics therefore even prevailed through all three centuries of the Renaissance whose "speculation on beauty", as Kristeller dryly remarked, "was still unrelated to the arts and apparently influenced by ancient models". While he was aware that the traditional system of the five arts had begun to "show signs of disintegration" and a tendency towards the notion of "Art as Experience", as John Dewey put it, would eventually weaken the conventional notion of the fine arts,¹⁹ his thesis came to be in art history and theory what a critic called a "dogma".²⁰

If one agrees with Reinhart Koselleck that providing "assistance to sobering up" (*Beihilfe zur Ernüchterung*) is not the least important task of the historian,²¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller had definitely done his duty by the mid 1950s. Interestingly enough, in the remaining decades of his life he dedicated the most part of his scholarly endeavor not to write books or come up with new thoughts and theses, but to something usually not held to be the first-choice academic activity: bibliographical work.

His opus magnum was a massive catalogue, the *Iter Italicum*, a finding list of about 200 000 previously uncatalogued or incompletely catalogued Renaissance humanist and philosophy manuscripts he located in libraries and collections in Italy and all over the world. Published by the Warburg Institute, as it was agreed with Fritz Saxl already in 1945, the *Iter's* first volume ("Italy: Agregento to Novara") came out in 1962, the sixth and last volume with manuscript descriptions in 1992, with two index-volumes following until 1997. As one of his close students put it, "almost all the work was done by Kristeller himself, from the taking of notes by hand *in situ* in hundreds of libraries to collating the information and typing up the descriptions once he was back home. Only for the last two volumes did he make use of assistants for other than for compiling the indices. The encyclopedic knowledge, paleographic skill, organizational ability, and unflagging energy needed to complete it make the *Iter* one of the great triumphs of modern scholarship by one man."²²

¹⁹ Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts" (1951/52), in: id., *Renaissance Thought II*, 163-227, 186 and 227.

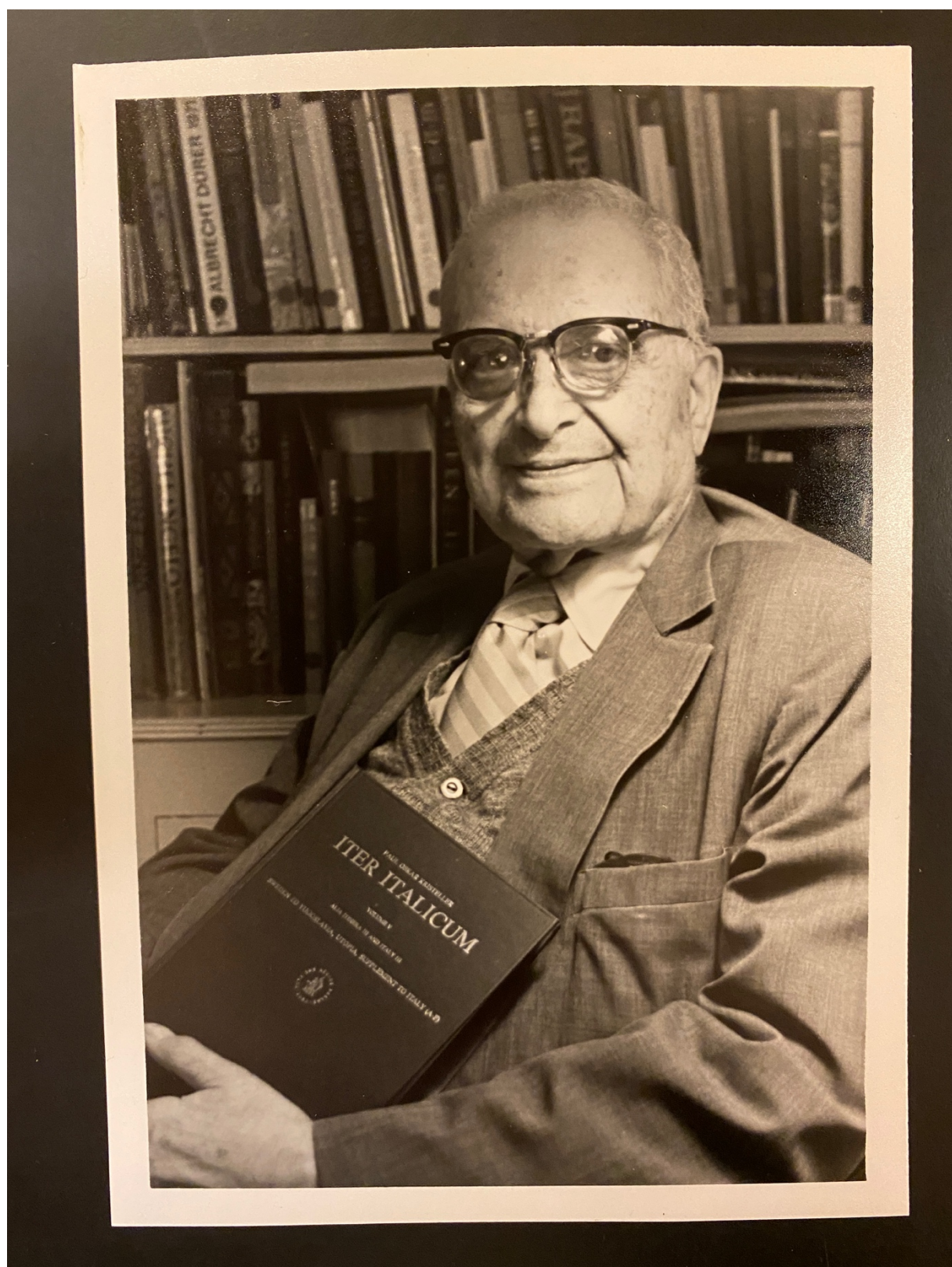
²⁰ James I. Porter, „Is Art Modern? Kristeller's ‚Modern System of the Arts‘ Reconsidered“, in: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (2009) 1, 1-24, 2.

²¹ Reinhart Koselleck, „Die Geschichte der Begriffe und Begriffe der Geschichte“, Id., *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*, ed. Carsten Dutt, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2006, 56-76, 56.

²² John Monfasani, „Preface. Paul Oskar Kristeller. A Life of Learning“, in: Gilbhard, *Bibliographia Kristelleriana*, VII-XVII, XIII.

Kristeller knew himself that the significance of the very monument of his one-man scholarship would not be obvious to everyone. In the *Iter Italicum*'s 1962 preface he came up with an example for the lack of understanding he frequently encountered: "And since I was told by an official of a noted foundation, as a reason for its refusal to support the present work, that such an undertaking is not in keeping with the spirit of our times but should have been carried out in the nineteenth century, I should like to reply that the fact that it was not done in the nineteenth century is precisely why it must be done now."²³—The official who eventually secured the *Iter*'s decisive funding by the Bollingen Foundation, by the way, proved to be no other than his late friend Siegfried Kracauer, the eminent cultural critic and film theorist, whose unfinished last book, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, Kristeller completed and edited in 1969.

²³ Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Preface", *Iter Italicum: a Finding List of Uncatalogued or Incompletely Catalogued Humanistic Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and other Libraries*. Volume 1: *Italy: Agregento to Novara*. Compiled by Paul Oskar Kristeller. London: The Warburg Institute; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963, XI-XXVIII, XXI f.



780. cart. misc. XV-XVI in. a German hand.
85 fols.

Sallust, with glosses. At the beginning (f. 1-1v),
a letter of Laetus to Augustinus Maffeus.

NOVARA

Biblioteca Capitolare (1958).

Descriptions

The mss. are completely, though not adequately,
described by Mazzatinti VI, p. 70-101. He gives
the valid shelf marks in parentheses.

XXV. mbr. XIII. 2 coll. 70 fols. Faded in the
beginning. Cf. Mazzatinti VI, p. 81, n. 43.

Fratr G(u)li(emu)s de Cortemil(ia) O.P.,
comm. on Boethius' consolatio, inc. Exhortationi.

LXXXIV. mbr. misc. XV. Fols. not numbered.
Cf. Mazzatinti VI, p. 96, n. 121.

Plutarch, de liberis educandis, tr. Guarinus,
with preface. — Basil, de studiis, tr. Leon. Brunus,
with preface. — Incipit liber de bello Punico
traductus per Leonardum (Brunum) Aretinum de
greco in latinum, inc. Vereor ne qui me putent. —
Ant. Hyvanus, de claro adolescente instituendo,
to Augustinus de Campofregoso (1466).

XCIII. cart. XV. I, 72 fols. Cf. Mazzatinti VI,
p. 95, n. 116.

f. I. Quedam precepta Guarini Veronensis de
studendi ordine ad... Leonellum scripta in fine
cuiusdam ad eum epistole, inc. Ut igitur et absens,
des. (I v) obsurdare desinam. f. 1-72v. Opereta
de la conservazione de la sanitate directiva
a... Astorgio Agnese Napolitano... per ma-
gistro Benedicto de Reguardati de Norsa, inc.
Con summo et diligentissimo studio se conviene.
At the end: Expletus Mediolani anno 1468 15
Jan. et transcriptus in 6 diebus cum magno
strepitu pullorum equorum indomitum.

XCIV. mbr. XIV-XV. 53 fols. Cf. Mazzatinti
VI, p. 91, n. 89.

NOVARA

Biblioteca Negroni e Civica.

The older mss. are completely listed by Mazza-
tinti VI, p. 51-64, and XXXI, p. 129-173, and by
A. Viglio (*Bollettino storico per la provincia di
Novara* XIX 1925, 32-53; 142-56). The valid
shelf marks were kindly supplied for the following
mss. by the librarian, Prof. Ettore Camaschella.
I did not see the mss.

Excerpts

E 58. G(audentius) Merula, Europa. s. XVI.
Viglio, p. 150. Mazzatinti VI, p. 52-53, n. 3.

E 115. misc. XV. Doctrina hermetica, and other
alchemical texts. Viglio, p. 151.

F 35. s. XVI. Anon. comm. on Aristotle's
Rhetoric, inc. Antequam Aristotelem de eloquendi
ratione. Viglio, p. 151.

NOVARA

Biblioteca di S. Gaudenzio (1958).

The mss. were completely described by F. Curlo,
Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino XIII 1908,
97-154; XIV 1909, 96-118. These mss. were lost
during the last war.

Excerpts

Of special interest was the ms. mbr. 12, described
by Curlo XIII, p. 144-145: mbr. misc. XVI in.
43 fols. f. 26v. Ugolinus Verinus, letter to Blasius
Generalis Ordinis Vallis Umbrose. 27. The same,

Sylva in laudem S. Johannis Gualberti. 28v. The
same, Deprecatio... pro patria Florentina pro
sacro ordine Vallis Umbrose et pro se ipso Ugolino
auctore carminis huius. 29-29v. Ugolini Verini
in laudem D. Blasii Milanensis civis Florentini...
carmen. f. 43: Finit vita S. Bernardi... scripta
per me D. Alamannum monachum professorem
Vallis Umbrose pro monasterio S. Trinitatis de
Florentia expensis eiusdem monasterii anno d.
1509.