

Our cultural heritage – yesterday, today and tomorrow

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Lucretius' words *Ex nihilo nihil fit* should be said to a person who denies that cultural heritage is of vital importance to creative activity.

In a natural way, cultural heritage manifests itself in the line of three generations: father passes his trade onto his son and teaches him the appropriate skills; the grandparents make him conscious of history. The vivid stories told by grandmothers may turn out to be of paramount importance to the younger generations. Such generation chains can also be found in the cultural history of advanced civilizations: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides within Attic tragedy as well as Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio in the literary history of the Renaissance.

“Conquered Greece conquered the brute victor and brought her arts into rustic Latium” (Horace). Greece laid the foundations for our culture, which, however, did not become a tradition until Rome conveyed it, in its whole extent, from Greek to Latin, from Athens to Rome. When, in addition, pagan religious beliefs were combined with Christian faith, Ambrose could sing in his hymn that “the head of the peoples of the world had been elected to become the home of the teacher of nations”. The process has continued through the Middle Ages till the recent centuries and today. In the course of time, new peoples have come to share this tradition.

The history of classical humanism from Cicero to Thomas Mann is one of the greatest chapters in the story of the European civilization. The idea of Man, as it was presented by ancient philosophers, was crystallised by Cicero into the definition *animal rationis particeps* “living being who enjoys his share of reason”. This was to become the base for the European idea of humanity (Erasmus, Herder), for the idea of the autonomous subject (Cartesius: “Cogito, ergo sum.”) and even for man's scientific name *homo sapiens* (Linné). Classical humanism was also able to meet the challenges of irrationalism and relativism in the cultural crisis of a century ago (Thomas Mann), and is, as such, a solid part of our cultural heritage.

Living cultural history is prone to paradoxes: the original purpose will lead to an unexpected result and give birth to “creative mistakes”. According to its name, the Renaissance attempted to revive the ancient values, after the “dark” Middle Ages. However, the ancient world did not rise from the dead; but, instead, something totally new was born, which continues to inspire us even here and now.

The lecture aims at dealing with similar phenomena and will criticise the superficial or even erroneous ideas typical of today.