

**Competing Humanisms:
Debating Cultural Identity in
Leonardo Bruni's *Dialogi ad
Petrum Paulum Histrum***

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Humanist cultural identity in Bruni's *Dialogi*

When, in the mid and late fifteenth century, Italian humanists looked at their history in retrospect, they generally thought of Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) as the most representative exponent of early Quattrocento humanism.¹ Their judgment was not unfounded. Indeed, Bruni had been among the first to epitomize fully the qualities that were later to become the characteristic features of humanist culture. His lucid and elegant Ciceronian Latin was incomparable to that of previous generations. His mastery over the Greek language, which he had acquired as a pupil of Manuel Chrysoloras (1355–1415), was displayed by his translations from Xenophon, Plato, Plutarch, Demosthenes, and Aristotle. His *De interpretatione recta* set a standard for humanist translations, as did his *Historiae Florentini populi* for humanist historiography.

Bruni also took an active part in the political life of the Florentine Republic, serving as a chancellor from 1410 to 1411 and, again, from 1427 to his death in 1444. Bruni's civic engagement influenced most of his works. Perhaps for this reason "political interpretations" of Bruni acquired a special place in the history of scholarship. Hans Baron and Eugenio Garin both looked at Bruni's works as the keystone of their analyses of what they called "civic humanism"; subsequently, J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner stressed Bruni's centrality in the history of republican thought; more recently, Bruni's political persona has guided the inquiries of scholars such as James Hankins and Paolo Viti.²

These interpretations have proven essential for understanding Bruni's historical works, orations, and letters. Yet the same cannot be said about Bruni's *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum* (1406).³ This is not to say that the cultural stances presented in the *Dialogi* are devoid of political

1 implications: as recently demonstrated by Arthur Field, intellectual and
2 political stances were inextricably connected in the cultural environment
3 of fifteenth-century Florence.⁴ However, political interpretations of Bruni's
4 *Dialogi* risk overshadowing the speculative, "cultural" character of Bruni's
5 project, which was instead perceived by fifteenth-century intellectuals as
6 Bruni's major contribution to the history of humanism. As remarked by Pat-
7 rick Baker, humanists in the late fifteenth century did not remember Bruni
8 for his political efforts, but rather for his translations, Ciceronian Latin, and
9 his cultural project generally. In other words, Bruni was perceived as "the
10 one who, after nearly a millennium of neglect, restored not classical political
11 thought but classical eloquence."⁵

12 In light of this fifteenth-century interpretation of Bruni's cultural
13 inheritance, the main significance of the *Dialogi* for Quattrocento human-
14 ism can be seen to derive from the dialogues' "cultural" rather than "politi-
15 cal" message. As remarked by scholars such as Riccardo Fubini, Lars Boje
16 Mortensen, Carol E. Quillen, and David Quint, the *Dialogi* is a fundamental
17 document of the process that, in the early fifteenth century, led to the defini-
18 tion of a humanist ideal and cultural identity.⁶ Yet, Bruni's *Dialogi* should
19 not be read primarily as the manifesto of a new generation of humanists—
20 represented in the *Dialogi* by Niccolò Niccoli (ca. 1364–1437) and Bruni
21 himself—who sought to assert the novelty of their cultural program over
22 against earlier traditions that were ipso facto labeled as not (wholly) human-
23 ist.⁷ Although such a claim is certainly part and parcel of Bruni's argument,
24 it does not reflect the main purpose of the *Dialogi*. Bruni's aim was more
25 nuanced: he did not seek to portray humanist culture in contrast to earlier
26 traditions, but rather to characterize early fifteenth-century humanism as
27 a highly variegated movement that encompassed different competing cur-
28 rents, some of which—according to Bruni—were undesirable.

29 While most Bruni scholars have read the *Dialogi* as documenting
30 the shift from a certain Weltanschauung to a different one, I would like
31 to suggest that the *Dialogi* also, perhaps especially, documents the choice
32 between two concurrent Weltanschauungen, that is, between two cultural
33 alternatives that were still to be debated at the time of the composition of the
34 *Dialogi*. These alternatives, represented by Niccoli and by Bruni respectively,
35 involved essential questions concerning the humanist program, for instance,
36 its degree of receptiveness to scholastic philosophy, vernacular traditions,
37 and non-Ciceronian Latin models.

38 The alternatives brought to the fore of the cultural debate by Bruni
39 characterize the whole history of humanism rather than solely belonging

1 to a certain generation of humanists. Even when Brunni distances himself
2 from the earlier humanist tradition emblemized by Coluccio Salutati
3 (1331–1406), he does so in order to bring out the different attitudes that
4 humanists belonging to his own generation embraced in dealing with medi-
5 eval and early Renaissance traditions. As it emerges from the *Dialogi*, the
6 relationship between Brunni’s humanism and Salutati’s cultural stances is a
7 relationship of partial continuity and critical reconsideration. Brunni clearly
8 perceives the generational gap that separates him from his master, but, while
9 seeking to distinguish his project from its antecedents, he also recognizes
10 Salutati’s lasting influence. That is to say, Brunni advances an inclusivist
11 cultural ideology that, for reasons of intellectual or political convenience,
12 does not reject precedent traditions outright, but rather tries to revise and
13 incorporate them. At the same time, Brunni also distances himself from the
14 extremist conception of culture emblemized in the first book of the *Dia-*
15 *logi* by Niccoli, who advocates rejecting the entirety of earlier traditions. I
16 thus do not agree with Hankins and Quint, who argue that Brunni was fasci-
17 nated by Niccoli’s intransigent conception of humanism.⁸ On the contrary, I
18 see Niccoli’s “radical humanism” as emerging from the *Dialogi* as both intel-
19 lectually impoverishing and possibly dangerous, since it leaves the whole
20 humanist group excessively exposed to criticism from culturally conservative
21 factions of Renaissance society.

22 As I will demonstrate in the following sections, Brunni’s inclusiv-
23 ist ideal of humanism clearly emerges from the dynamics that regulate the
24 opposition between the main cultural stances portrayed in the *Dialogi*. The
25 analysis of these dialectical oppositions allows us to grasp not only the gen-
26 eral character of Brunni’s inclusivist ideal but also the precise degree to which
27 Brunni was ready to adopt inclusivist attitudes.

28 29 **The structure of the *Dialogi***

30
31 In the first book of the *Dialogi*, the scene opens on the streets of Florence,
32 where Brunni, Niccoli, and Roberto de’ Rossi (1355–1417) have convened
33 in order to pay a visit to their friend and mentor, Coluccio Salutati. After
34 greeting his visitors, Salutati exhorts his younger colleagues not to overlook
35 the art of discussion (*disputatio*) in their studies. Salutati is right—Niccoli
36 admits—but he and his friends are not to blame for having neglected the *ars*
37 *disputandi*: the fault is not theirs but of the time they live in (“hac faece tem-
38 porum”).⁹ In spite of this preamble, Niccoli proves himself to be a worthy
39 *disputator*, and the remaining part of Book 1 is taken up by a discussion with

1 Salutati on the merits of the Moderns compared to the Ancients. Not only,
2 according to Niccoli, should scholastic philosophy be entirely rejected, but
3 even the achievements of the three crowns (Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio),
4 which Salutati highly praises, ultimately betray a lack of erudition and style.

5 Salutati is satisfied by Niccoli's skills in *disputatio*, but he strongly
6 disagrees with Niccoli's negative appraisal of the recent literary and philo-
7 sophical tradition. Yet, as the day is drawing to a close, Salutati must content
8 himself with restating his belief that Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio were
9 "men endowed with many and excellent talents, worthy of the reputation
10 they are universally acknowledged" [homines multis optimisque artibus
11 ornatos dignosque eo nomine quod tanto consensu omnium ipsis tributum
12 est] (*Dialogi*, 1.53).

13 Book 2 is set on the following day. After a brief eulogy of Florence,
14 the discussion goes back to the three crowns. All the injurious things Niccoli
15 had said (he confesses) were aimed at eliciting a defense of the three crowns
16 from Salutati. But since his plot had not succeeded, Niccoli is ready to make
17 amends by defending the three poets himself. What follows sounds like a
18 full recantation: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio are to be praised for their
19 exceptional knowledge and for the elegance of their style, so much so that in
20 no way they fall short of the Ancients.

21 In light of the contrasting attitudes embraced by Niccoli in Book
22 1 and Book 2, Hans Baron famously suggested that the two books of the
23 *Dialogi* had been composed at different times, with different purposes. This
24 thesis has been rejected by virtually all recent scholars, who have stressed
25 instead the unitary and coherent nature of Bruni's work. Indeed, the appar-
26 ent contradictions that characterize Niccoli's stance in Books 1 and 2 are a
27 crucial element of the dialectical structure through which Bruni advances
28 his argument. More precisely, the seemingly contradictory character of Bru-
29 ni's dialogue conforms to the technique of *disputatio in utramque partem*
30 and follows the dialectical model of the *Dialogi*, that is, Cicero's *De oratore*.¹⁰
31 In contrast to the ideal of the perfect orator outlined by Lucius Licinius
32 Crassus in the first book of the *De oratore*, Marcus Antonius describes the
33 perfect orator as a sort of underworkman ("operarium quendam"). In the
34 second book, however, Antonius advances a much more moderate position:
35 like Niccoli in the *Dialogi*, he revises the positions taken on the previous day,
36 when, he admits, he had tried to confute Crassus in order to steal two of his
37 disciples from him.¹¹

1 Scholasticism in the *Dialogi*

2 Instructed by the example of the *De oratore*, we should be cautious in tak-
3 ing Niccoli's contradictory claims at face value. The fact that the fictional
4 Niccoli—like the fictional Antonius—ultimately revises the position dis-
5 played in Book 1 does not imply that such revision should encompass all the
6 individual claims advanced on the first day. Indeed, some of the accusations
7 made by Niccoli in Book 1 do not undergo any revision. This is the case
8 in the attack directed against scholastic philosophy and dialectics, which is
9 never recanted in Book 2, hence remaining essentially confirmed through-
10 out the *Dialogi*.¹²

11 In this regard, Bruni's stance can be compared to Petrarch's posi-
12 tion in *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*. Petrarch's attack against the
13 traditional sources of medieval authority, and especially against scholastic
14 philosophy, are clearly echoed in the *Dialogi*. For instance, Bruni shares
15 Petrarch's typically humanist bias against medieval dialectics, which is criti-
16 cized in the *De ignorantia* for its inherently contentious and sophistic char-
17 acter. As Niccoli tells Salutati in Book 1, prefiguring a central argument of
18 Valla's *Repastinatio dialecticae*: “[I]s there anything in dialectics, Coluccio,
19 that has not been confused by British sophisms [britannicis sophismatibus
20 conturbatum]? Is there anything that has not been separated from the old
21 and true way of disputing, and turned to absurdities and trifles [ineptias
22 levitatesque]?” (*Dialogi*, 1.25). These flaws are aggravated by the complete
23 lack of eloquence that affects all scholastic philosophers. “At present”—one
24 reads in the *De ignorantia*—“the only things they honor in a philosopher are
25 babyish and puzzled babbling” [Sic iam sola philosophantis infantia et per-
26 plexa balbuties . . . in honore est].¹³ And, similarly, in the *Dialogi*: “[W]hen
27 they speak, [our philosophers] make more mistakes than sentences [plures
28 solecismos quam verba faciunt]” (1.20).

29 The accusations that Niccoli levels at scholastic philosophers belong
30 to a standard argument that, inaugurated by Petrarch, was advanced by
31 humanists throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The main refer-
32 ence of these criticisms was to a precise set of nominalist or, more precisely,
33 terminist doctrines that spread in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century
34 scholastic environment. However, the humanist polemical tradition dis-
35 played a marked tendency toward generalization, and antiterminist claims
36 soon came to be used as an argument against scholastic culture on the whole.
37 In this “general” sense, antischolastic criticism is certainly part and parcel of
38 Bruni's argument, although it constitutes perhaps its least groundbreaking
39

1 aspect. Like Petrarch some forty years earlier, Bruni too is convinced that
2 humanist culture must adopt a new language that, by imitating classical
3 Latin, could oppose the abstract verbosity of scholastic philosophers.

4 Having said that, one has the impression that Bruni takes this aspect
5 of his polemic almost for granted, as a well-known and fairly unproblematic
6 topos in the humanist discourse. Compared to other points at issue, Nic-
7 coli's accusations against scholastic philosophers take up little space in the
8 discussion reported by the *Dialogi*, suggesting that the opposition between
9 humanism and scholasticism is not the prime concern of Bruni's work, as
10 was instead the case for Petrarch. Although Bruni does see his cultural enter-
11 prise as dissimilar from and, in many respects, opposite to medieval and
12 scholastic culture, the principal aim of the *Dialogi* is to discuss a different
13 set of cultural assumptions that prevailed in Bruni's own time. Rather than
14 rehearsing Petrarch's criticism against scholasticism, Bruni intends to dis-
15 cuss cultural positions that he deems more relevant for the formation of a
16 collective humanist identity in the early fifteenth century. More specifically,
17 these are the conceptions of humanism portrayed in the *Dialogi* by Niccoli
18 and Salutati respectively.

20 **Niccolò Niccoli: Fiction and reality**

21
22 The dialectical structure of the *Dialogi* is not the only feature that Bruni
23 borrowed from the *De oratore*. As Cicero himself admitted, Crassus and
24 especially Antonius were not actually endowed with the vast cultural back-
25 ground he ascribed to them.¹⁴ Notwithstanding, Cicero's characterization
26 of Crassus and Antonius was carried out according to verisimilitude. Anto-
27 nius, who famously excelled in the *inventio* and *dispositio* of the arguments,
28 expounded on these canons of rhetoric in the dialogue. Crassus, who was
29 instead best known for his stylistic excellence, illustrated the techniques
30 related to *elocutio* and *actio*.¹⁵ By the same token, in characterizing the fic-
31 tional Niccoli in Book 1, Bruni exaggerates and even distorts some aspects of
32 his friend's cultural positions; however, he does not exceed the boundaries of
33 fictional verisimilitude.

34 Although Niccoli never wrote anything except perhaps an *Ortho-*
35 *graphia* that has not survived, he played a central role in the development of
36 early Quattrocento humanism. Throughout the first quarter of the fifteenth
37 century, he maintained a lively correspondence with both Bruni and Pog-
38 gio Bracciolini (1380–1459). Together with Poggio's, Niccoli's efforts were
39 also of paramount importance for the humanist recovery of classical litera-

1 ture. Niccoli commissioned an astounding number of high-quality copies of
2 newly found codices and circulated them generously in the humanist milieu,
3 as recalled in Poggio's *Oratio in funere Nicolai Nicoli*.¹⁶ Niccoli's significance
4 for early Quattrocento culture was also recognized by the authors who, in
5 the late fifteenth century, tried to outline a retrospective history of Italian
6 humanism.¹⁷

7 Due to his relevance in the humanist cultural environment, Niccoli
8 was chosen as a fictional character not only by Bruni, but also by Poggio
9 in his *De nobilitate* and the *De infelicitate principum*. While fictional char-
10 acterizations of Niccoli reflected his paramount role in early Quattrocento
11 humanism, they also contained elements of exaggeration and distortion
12 that made the fictional Niccoli—especially in Bruni's *Dialogi*—a much less
13 nuanced intellectual than he was in reality. However, overdrawn as Bruni's
14 characterization of Niccoli may be, it nonetheless obeys a principle of veri-
15 similitude, especially with regard to Niccoli's radical classicism, which was
16 well known within the circle of his friends and colleagues.

17 As first noted in passing by Baron, all evidence suggests that the
18 positions advocated in Book 1 of the *Dialogi* reflect a set of classicist assump-
19 tions that were generally ascribed to Niccoli.¹⁸ Salutati himself, in an epis-
20 tolarly debate with Poggio over the merits of Petrarch, insinuated that an
21 unnamed friend had assisted Poggio in formulating his critique of the poet.
22 This unnamed friend—scholars agree—can be no one but Niccoli.¹⁹ And,
23 indeed, there is overwhelming evidence linking Niccoli to the sort of state-
24 ments advanced in Book 1. For instance, in a letter to Niccoli, Bruni refers
25 to the friend's complaints about the nullity of the Moderns compared to the
26 Ancients.²⁰ Hyperclassicist stances are also attributed to Niccoli by virtually
27 all contemporary authors. In his *De viris illustribus*, Enea Silvio Piccolomini
28 writes about Niccoli: “[H]e did not praise any of the living, and amongst the
29 dead only four: Plato, Vergil, Jerome, and Horace” [nullum enim viventem
30 commendavit, ex mortuis solum quatuor: Platonem, Virgilium, Jeronimum
31 et Oratium].²¹

32 Besides, most humanists also agree on another fundamental trait
33 of Niccoli's personality that is reflected in his fictional characterization.
34 Even Niccoli's closest friends admitted that he was uncommonly irascible,
35 especially so concerning the issue of comparing the Ancients and the Mod-
36 erns. The arrogant and uncritical preference for the Ancients imputed to
37 Niccoli by Salutati in his letter to Poggio is in keeping with the criticism
38 expressed in Book 1 of Bruni's *Dialogi*. Introducing his assessment of the
39 three crowns, the fictional Niccoli addresses Salutati: “What Dantes . . . are

1 you recalling me? What Petrarchs? What Boccaccios? Do you believe, per-
2 haps, that I hold the same opinions of the crowd?" [Quos tu mihi Dantes . . .
3 commemoras? Quos Petrarchas? Quos Boccattios? An tu putas me vulgi
4 opinionibus iudicare?] (1.41). According to the fictional Niccoli of Book 1,
5 rather than equaling Vergil, as maintained by Salutati, Dante was entirely
6 ignorant and could not write in proper Latin; he was an author suited for
7 belt-makers (*zonarii*) and bakers, but certainly not for the literates (1.42–44).
8 Petrarch, who was extolled by all Florentines (Niccoli carries on), put forth
9 his *Africa* after great expectation, which turned out to be quite the Horatian
10 *ridiculus mus*—a rather insulting allegation given that Salutati himself had
11 so sternly advocated the publication of the *Africa* in his *Metra incitatoria ad*
12 *Africae editionem* of 1376.²² To conclude with Boccaccio, who—even Salu-
13 tati acknowledged—had been surpassed by Dante and Petrarch, according
14 to the fictional Niccoli, he is not even worth mentioning (1.49).

15 The connection established by Brunni between the real Niccoli and
16 his fictional counterpart in Book 1 is essential for our understanding of Bru-
17 nni's stance. By this means, Brunni intends to signify that the critical position
18 presented in Book 1 is not purely abstract or theoretical, as was often the case
19 with at least one of the arguments advanced in *disputationes in utramque par-*
20 *tem*. On the contrary, although the real Niccoli was probably less extreme in
21 his convictions than his fictional counterpart, criticisms advanced in Book 1
22 belong to an actual cultural current that characterized some sections of the
23 early Quattrocento humanist environment. As it emerges from its caricature
24 in Book 1, this cultural current was inspired by an ideal of extreme classis-
25 ticism that elected few authors as the only acceptable models. Such a cultural
26 project left little space for innovation, except for the sake of faithfully restor-
27 ing the golden age of ancient splendor. Accordingly, the fictional Niccoli of
28 Book 1 believes that all cultural stances that differ from the classics should
29 be rejected. Most notably, such rejection also encompasses instances of cul-
30 tural production that are envisaged as adaptations of the classical models
31 themselves, as in the case of Petrarch's *Africa*.

32 33 **Humanism and traditional culture**

34
35 This cultural perspective did not win the approval of all the humanists
36 belonging to Niccoli's generation. Even a moderate classicist such as Pog-
37 gio expressed concern about the theoretical consequences of extreme classis-
38 ticism.²³ In a letter dated June 4, 1433, for example, Poggio invites Niccoli to
39 moderate his indiscriminate contempt for the Moderns and to consider that

1 there were (few) authors who deserve to be admired in the present time as
2 well.²⁴ Bruni shared Poggio's concern. In fact, I would argue that the main
3 purpose of the *Dialogi* was precisely to criticize the extremist cultural posi-
4 tion that in the humanist circle was espoused by Niccoli, who was hence
5 chosen by Bruni in order to advocate in Book 1 an exaggerated and almost
6 fanatical version of classicism.

7 By pursuing this objective, Bruni also sought to defend his posi-
8 tion from criticism coming from nonhumanist sectors of Renaissance cul-
9 ture. More specifically, by orchestrating the dialectical opposition between
10 Book 1 and Book 2, Bruni tried to present humanist culture as a variegated
11 movement that did not necessarily subscribe to the hyperclassicist positions
12 advanced in Book 1, but also encompassed more moderate and inclusive cur-
13 rents. In all probability, this variegated depiction of humanist culture was
14 primarily catered for nonhumanist intellectuals, from whose perspective the
15 differences that set apart humanist ideals such as Poggio's and Niccoli's were
16 all but evident.

17 Bruni's target audience belonged to a traditionalist current that
18 was still very relevant in early Renaissance culture and society. It is difficult
19 to define with precision "traditional culture," but some of its salient traits
20 included a general sympathy for late scholastic philosophy and especially for
21 terminism; a great admiration for the three crowns; a keen interest in vernac-
22 ular literature; and a suspicious attitude toward pagan antiquity.²⁵ Besides,
23 as stressed by Field, "many of the traditionalists built bridges of their own,
24 connecting their culture not only to the great non-Humanists Dante and
25 Boccaccio but also to Petrarch, Coluccio Salutati, and even Leonardo Bruni,
26 as well as to minor figures such as Luigi Marsili (1342–1394) and Roberto
27 de' Rossi."²⁶ For example, Marsili and Salutati were among the authors
28 praised in Giovanni Gherardi da Prato's *Paradiso degli Alberti* along with late
29 scholastic philosophers such as Biagio Pelacani (ca. 1350/54–1416) and expo-
30 nents of traditional culture such as Francesco Landini (ca. 1335–1397).²⁷

31 In brief, the cultural inclinations shared by traditionalists were very
32 different from the humanist ideal but not necessarily opposite to it. Tradi-
33 tionalists did not take issue with the humanist interest in classical eloquence,
34 nor did they object to the "constructive" elements of the humanist cultural
35 project. They were offended, however, by those who flaunted a generalized
36 contempt for all Moderns, advocating "destructive," hyperclassicist stances.
37 In responding to these provocations, traditionalists were not interested in
38 determining whether "destructive" stances were espoused by all the human-
39 ists belonging to Bruni's generation or just by some of them. They were

1 sure, however, that Niccoli fully embodied what they considered as the most
2 offensive intellectual attitude.

3 Accordingly, Niccoli and the culture he represented was attacked
4 by foremost exponents of the “traditional culture” such as the Gherardi
5 da Prato, Cino Rinuccini (ca. 1350–1417), and Domenico da Prato (ca.
6 1389–1433) in several invectives and literary works.²⁸ Domenico da Prato,
7 for instance, accused Niccoli for stating that “Dante’s book should be given
8 to apothecaries to make packets or to grocers to wrap salted fish” [il libro di
9 Dante esser da dare alli speciali per farne cartocci, o vero più tosto alli piz-
10 zicagnoli per porvi dentro il pesce salato].²⁹ The accusation was leveled at
11 the real Niccoli, but it was clearly in keeping with the claims contained in
12 Book 1 of the *Dialogi*, where the fictional Niccoli affirms that Dante’s works
13 should be saved for “belt-makers, bakers and that sort of people” [zonariis,
14 pistoribus atque eiusmodi turbæ] (1.44).

15 The convergence of the attacks leveled by traditionalists against the
16 real Niccoli on the one hand and the extremist positions adopted by the
17 fictional Niccoli in Book 1 on the other allows us to understand what could
18 have been one of the objectives pursued by Bruni in orchestrating the dia-
19 lectical oppositions that characterize the *Dialogi*. By having Niccoli recant
20 the extreme stances of Book 1, Bruni was differentiating his ideal of culture
21 from the most extreme flavors of humanism. In doing so, he also shielded
22 the newborn humanist movement from the attack of traditional sectors of
23 Renaissance culture. By demonstrating that not all humanists subscribed
24 to hyperclassicist theses such as those advanced in Book 1, Bruni implicitly
25 demonstrates that the traditional sectors of Renaissance culture had no reason
26 to oppose humanism in general.

27 A similar interpretation has been advanced in passing by Field, who
28 suggests that “Bruni was attempting to portray, through Niccoli, an ideolog-
29 ical position on moderns that Bruni himself was clearly identified with and
30 from which he now wanted to distance himself.”³⁰ Field cites in support of
31 his claim a passage in Book 1, where Salutati states that Bruni would rather
32 be wrong with Niccoli than right with him.³¹ This implies, according to
33 Field, that, around 1404, Bruni was perceived as a “Niccolian”: a perception
34 he intended to correct in the *Dialogi*. I largely agree with this interpretation,
35 although I believe that Bruni’s aim emerges from the dialectical structure of
36 the *Dialogi* as a whole rather than from individual passages. For instance,
37 an alternative reading of the statement cited by Field could refer to the fact
38 that Bruni’s cultural project belonged to a new generation of humanists,
39 including Niccoli, that as a group had distanced themselves from earlier

1 humanist conceptions such as Salutati's. Be that as it may, Bruni would have
2 had strong reasons to insist on distinguishing between different humanist
3 conceptions in his own time, and in particular between an extremist "Nic-
4 colian" position and a moderate stance that was not utterly incompatible
5 with traditional culture.

6 On the one hand, the *Dialogi* thus suggests that humanists belong-
7 ing to Bruni's generation were united in the desire to distinguish themselves
8 from some medieval traditions, such as scholastic philosophy and dialectics.
9 On the other hand, Bruni aims to describe the burgeoning humanist culture
10 as a variegated movement whose members disagreed on how precisely to dis-
11 tinguish themselves from their predecessors. Humanism, as it emerges from
12 the *Dialogi*, could not be entirely equated with Niccoli's extremist positions,
13 which had caused most of the antihumanist bias.

14 15 **Toward an inclusivist conception of humanism**

16
17 By portraying humanism as a variegated intellectual movement and by
18 shielding his own stance from the attacks of the traditional currents of
19 Renaissance culture, Bruni had achieved one of his objectives. A further
20 aim of the *Dialogi* was targeted to Bruni's fellow humanists and concerned
21 the very ideal of humanism. Bruni was not merely trying to avoid the pos-
22 sibility of criticism; he was also, and perhaps especially, proposing an ideal
23 of humanism that could be taken as an alternative to Niccoli's intransigent
24 classicism. More precisely, his was a notion of humanism that, unlike Nic-
25 colli's, was open to incorporating traditions that, although different from
26 those of the classics, could be revised instead of being rejected outright.

27 In order to support his ideal of culture, Bruni attacked the extremist
28 humanist current emblemized by the fictional Niccoli in Book 1 in three
29 different ways: implicitly, in Book 1; explicitly, in other works; and implicitly
30 again, in Book 2, by having Niccoli recant the statements advanced in Book
31 1. Implicit criticism in Book 1 has been addressed by many Bruni scholars.
32 Mortensen, for instance, proposes that "on the author's level," the debate
33 staged in Book 1 between Niccoli and Salutati is over before it begins. In
34 Mortensen's terms:

35 [T]he claims of Niccoli have . . . been invalidated by the author
36 of the dialogue in two ways. 1) The debate was occasioned by
37 silence. . . . The author thus implicitly tells us that Niccoli cham-
38 pions a lost cause. . . . 2) The obvious Ciceronian form and style
39

1 of the dialogue indicates in itself that Niccoli's condemnation of
2 the "moderns" must be revised; if the "moderns" were unable to
3 write, the author would have silenced himself.³²
4

5 What is more, implicit criticism emerges from the very style of Niccoli's
6 speech in Book 1. Niccoli's harangue against the three crowns is largely
7 centered upon statements that are not only excessive but also sophistic.
8 This seems to be implied by Salutati's ironic praise of Niccoli, who is com-
9 mended in Book 1 for having talked *subtilissime*—a quality that was com-
10 monly used by scholastic philosophers to describe a good *disputatio*, and, as
11 such, generally carried negative connotations for Bruni.³³

12 The caricatured nature of Niccoli's claims in Book 1 suggests that
13 Bruni did not feel any sympathy for them. On the contrary, he sought
14 to exaggerate and vulgarize for polemical purposes the positions held by
15 extreme classicists. I thus differ from scholars such as Quint, according to
16 whom "the evidence of the *Dialogues* suggests a younger Bruni fascinated by
17 a Niccoli who, from his position of privilege, inveighs against not only past
18 humanist tradition but the very idea of a humanist Renaissance." I also dis-
19 agree with Quint's suggestion that "simply by virtue of the fact that he does
20 the bulk of the talking in the *Dialogues*, Niccoli becomes their central char-
21 acter and 'hero.'"³⁴ As I read it, the very fact that Niccoli does the bulk of the
22 talking is an indication of how urgent it was for Bruni to oppose a cultural
23 strand that he considered dangerous for "the very idea of a humanist Renais-
24 sance." In other words, Niccoli is the central character of the *Dialogi* pre-
25 cisely because the cultural attitude he represents is the main object of Bruni's
26 criticism. Such criticism is expressed by having Niccoli expound his beliefs
27 in a grotesque way (Book 1), and then by punishing him with an obligation
28 to recant that certainly was not in character with the real Niccoli (Book 2).
29 Indeed, rather than the "hero" of the *Dialogi*, Niccoli is really their victim.

30 This does not mean, of course, that Bruni aimed to antagonize or
31 offend the real Niccoli. Clearly the *Dialogi* does not follow the rhetorical
32 model of the *invectiva* (all too familiar to humanist authors). On the con-
33 trary, the *Dialogi* reflects a sincere intellectual debate among friends and,
34 more specifically, among the members of the humanist group that had
35 formed around the elder Salutati. In spite of their intellectual (and political)
36 differences, Bruni and Niccoli remained close friends for more than a decade
37 following the publication of the *Dialogi*.³⁵ Their amicable and respectful
38 relationship throughout the 1410s is attested by Bruni's dedication of his
39 *Vita Ciceronis* to Niccoli, along with the many letters addressed to the friend

1 in the first books of Bruni's epistolary.³⁶ The relationship between Bruni
2 and Niccoli started to deteriorate, however, in the period around 1419.³⁷ The
3 growing ill feelings between the two caused Bruni's criticism of Niccoli's
4 cultural stances to become explicit and to extend to all aspects of Niccoli's
5 life, as was customary in humanist polemics.

6 In 1424, Bruni openly attacked Niccoli with a ferocious invective,
7 the *Oratio in nebulonem maledicum*.³⁸ The biting tone of the *Oratio* cannot
8 be compared to the dispassionate criticism advanced in the *Dialogi*, yet the
9 nature of the accusations leveled at Niccoli in the *Oratio* is in line with the
10 points made by Bruni almost two decades earlier. In the *Oratio*, the main
11 vice that Bruni imputes to Niccoli, *stultissimus homo*, is a "mixture of pride
12 and malevolence" [vanitas malignitate coniuncta]. This, according to Bruni,
13 is the very root of Niccoli's *innata dementia*, the origin of the "thousand
14 ridiculous things that he had said and done" [mille illius facta dictaque ridic-
15 ulla] (340). An example of such ridiculous affectation is provided by Bruni
16 in a sarcastic sketch of Niccoli, who is portrayed walking in the streets of
17 Florence with an air of self-conceited superiority "as if he was saying: 'Look
18 at me and recognize my incredibly deep knowledge: I am the pillar of letters,
19 the arch of science, the norm of doctrine and wisdom'" [quasi "Videte me,"
20 inquit, "ac meam sapientiam profundissimam nescitote: ego sum columen
21 litterarum, ego scientie archa, ego doctrine ac sapientie norma"] (340). Nic-
22 coli's affectation, Bruni continues, was made even more offensive by his arro-
23 gant attitude toward everyone else: "if the passersby do not pay attention to
24 him, he swells in rage and takes on complaining about the worthlessness of
25 the present times, in which letters and studies are held of no value" [quod si
26 forte non attendant obvii, continuo intumescit queriturque ignaviam seculi,
27 quod litteras et studia flocci pendat] (340).

28 According to Bruni's *Oratio*, Niccoli's *stultitia* and *vanitas* have
29 gone so far that he has come to look askance at everyone without excep-
30 tion. He believes that he can achieve fame by damaging the reputation of
31 all great men (342). For this reason, Niccoli never ceases inveighing against
32 Dante, a "great and noble poet," but also against Petrarch and Boccaccio,
33 not to mention Aquinas (342). The same treatment is meted out to all great
34 men, living and dead, except those who had died "a thousand years in the
35 past" (344). It is almost too easy for Bruni to take the final stab at Niccoli:
36 "if Petrarch himself, who is the author of so many excellent literary monu-
37 ments, was ignorant, how ignorant should we consider you, who could never
38 put together even two words in Latin?" [si Petrarcha ipse ignorans fuit, cuius
39 tot preclara extant monumenta litterarum, in quanta te ignorantia versari

1 existimandum est, qui numquam vel duo simul verba latine coniungere
2 scrivisti?] (346).

3 While this type of criticism, such as the attack implicitly leveled
4 against the fictional Niccoli in Book 1, is mainly destructive in character,
5 Bruni reserved constructive criticism for Book 2. In the second book of his
6 *Dialogi*, Bruni does not pass direct judgment on Niccoli's positions, whose
7 implicit rejection results from the very fact that Niccoli is forced to recant.
8 Rather, Bruni focuses in Book 2 on advancing an ideal of humanism that he
9 sees as an alternative to the path taken by Niccoli.

10 If the positions advanced in Book 2 thus belong to Bruni's cultural
11 project, it is clear why Niccoli should not sound too sincere in his recanta-
12 tion. Niccoli's lack of sincerity is not only natural but also belongs to a rhe-
13 torical reversal whose irony could not have escaped the members of Bruni's
14 entourage. All those who knew Niccoli also knew that the panegyric of the
15 three crowns delivered in Book 2 was not only at odds with Niccoli's actual
16 convictions but also with his personality. One can imagine, in fact, that it
17 would have been impossible for Bruni or Poggio to prevail upon Niccoli to
18 relinquish his extremist views. However, the literary fiction of the *Dialogi*
19 allows Bruni to claim his victory. As the author of Book 2, Bruni can pun-
20 ish the fictional Niccoli for his statements, forcing him—who was, in real-
21 ity, the least amenable of all people—to submissively abjure his convictions,
22 embracing instead a cultural project that was much closer to Bruni's. In
23 these terms, the lack of conviction on Niccoli's part is not an indication of
24 Bruni's insincerity or hesitation, as suggested by Quint.³⁹ On the contrary,
25 it is the ironic device adopted by Bruni to signal his fictional victory over
26 Niccoli.

27 28 **Coluccio Salutati in the *Dialogi***

29
30 The moderate, inclusivist ideal of humanism that Bruni contrasts with the
31 extremist stances emblemized by the fictional Niccoli is illustrated in the
32 *Dialogi* by Bruni's treatment of Salutati's cultural positions. Compared to
33 most humanists in Bruni's generation, Salutati was much more sympathetic
34 to characteristic features of medieval culture such as scholastic commentar-
35 ies, vernacular poetry, etymological investigations, and allegoresis.⁴⁰ In Ron-
36 ald Witt's terms, Salutati did not "embrace Petrarch's notion of the 'Dark
37 Ages.' For him, the centuries intervening between antiquity and the present
38 had been more like an arctic summer evening, with the thirteenth century as
39 the brief night before the rising sun with Mussato and Geri."⁴¹

1 Bruni's inclusivist ideal of humanism was much more critical than
2 Salutati's toward medieval culture. In this regard, the difference between
3 Salutati's and Bruni's cultural projects surfaces on more than one occasion
4 in the *Dialogi*. This is the case, for instance, of Salutati's appraisal of the
5 *ars disputandi*. Following his master, the Augustinian friar Luigi Marsili,
6 Salutati highly praised disputation, which he considered one of the three
7 areas of learning appropriate for Christian eloquence, along with preaching
8 (*predicare*) and teaching (*docere*).⁴² As a fictional character, Salutati admon-
9 ishes his younger colleagues to practice the art of discussion, as he himself
10 had done (*Dialogi*, 1.7). In order to convince Bruni and his friends, Salutati
11 commemorates Marsili, whom, as a young scholar, he frequently visited to
12 discuss the most diverse topics (1.11–12). Salutati's peroration is successful
13 and apparently convinces Niccoli, who agrees with the elder friend: "You
14 are right, Coluccio. I trust that one could hardly find something that may
15 benefit our studies more than discussion [disputatio]. Nor have I heard this
16 only from you, but also many times from Luigi [Marsili], whose commemo-
17 ration of yours has almost moved me to tears" (1.14). Yet, as remarked by
18 Fubini, Niccoli's submissiveness is merely apparent.⁴³ And, although he pro-
19 vides an example of *disputatio* by discussing the merits of the Moderns, or
20 the lack thereof, he does so after implicitly undermining Salutati's notion of
21 *disputatio*.

22 Discussion, Niccoli admits, is a greatly rewarding exercise for those
23 who can count upon solid knowledge and reliable sources. However, the
24 decay of all disciplines and the lack of books have affected modern culture
25 so deeply that, due to their ignorance, *disputatores* cannot but appear inept
26 (*Dialogi*, 1.15–16). In other words, according to Niccoli, throughout the
27 period stretching from the Middle Ages to the present, the basic require-
28 ments for *disputatio* had not been met and, as a result, rather than practicing
29 the *ars disputandi*, modern philosophers indulged in "vain garrulity" [*gar-
30 rulitas vana*] (1.16). Niccoli does not go so far as to openly attack Salutati on
31 this point, but neither does he revise his appraisal of the *ars disputandi* in
32 Book 2. Altogether, the implicit meaning of Niccoli's statements is clear: as
33 conceived by Salutati and, before him, by Marsili, the notion of *disputatio*
34 belongs to modern culture (or lack thereof) and as such is to be considered
35 little more than sophistry.

36 This passage on the *ars disputandi* is quite revealing of Bruni's atti-
37 tude toward Salutati and, more generally, of his inclusivist ideal of human-
38 ism. On the one hand, without coming into overt conflict with the elder
39 humanist, thanks to Niccoli's words, Bruni distances himself from the cul-

1 tural stance represented by Salutati and, more generally, from the environ-
2 ment of the Santo Spirito convent, to which Marsili belonged. On the other
3 hand, Bruni revises Salutati's position rather than rejecting it outright.⁴⁴ In
4 fact, Niccoli's *disputatio in utramque partem*, which extends throughout the
5 whole *Dialogi*, suggests that the cultural renaissance driven by the human-
6 ists could also bring forth a renaissance of the *ars disputandi*. In its humanist
7 flavor, however, as conceived by Bruni, disputation can no longer follow the
8 medieval models that Salutati refers to. Rather, it needs to revive classical
9 rhetorical models, such as Cicero's *De oratore*.

10 Another aspect of Salutati's thought that partially distinguished his
11 cultural stances from Bruni's is the appraisal of Petrarch, who is commended
12 by Niccoli in Book 2 of the *Dialogi*. As in the case of the *ars disputandi*,
13 here too, Bruni seems to accept Salutati's position; yet, on closer inspection,
14 he only accepts a deeply revised and radically new version of it. In order to
15 appreciate the novelty of Bruni's approach, one needs to consider Salutati's
16 assessment of Petrarch's virtues. Toward the close of the fourteenth century,
17 Petrarch's literary and philosophical merits were a popular topic among the
18 Florentine intellectual elite.⁴⁵ Marsili was a great admirer of Petrarch, and
19 Salutati himself extolled the works of the poet on many occasions.⁴⁶

20 A first, cursory praise of Petrarch is contained in an early letter from
21 Salutati to Francesco Nelli da Empoli.⁴⁷ Some years later, in 1379, Salu-
22 tati wrote to Giovanni Bartolomei expressing his concern over his friend's
23 uncertainty about whether Petrarch should be preferred over Homer, Hes-
24 iod, Theocritus, Vergil, Demosthenes, Cicero, Varro, and Seneca. Accord-
25 ing to Salutati, even the greatest of the Ancients, Vergil and Cicero, did not
26 compare with Petrarch, who surpassed the former in both poetry and prose,
27 and equaled the latter in prose while surpassing him in poetry.⁴⁸ Besides,
28 according to Salutati, Petrarch was not only a great poet but also a great
29 philosopher. Most importantly, however, unlike the Ancients, Petrarch was
30 a Christian. In fact, he was the model of the Christian philosopher, who
31 brings together his love for the classics with the love for Christ.⁴⁹

32 Such a tendency to stress Petrarch's Christianity and to cite it as an
33 argument for his superiority over the Ancients became more pronounced in
34 the last years of Salutati's life.⁵⁰ Until the end of the 1360s, Salutati's defense
35 of pagan classics had conformed to the markedly secular humanist tradi-
36 tion that, before Petrarch, had been inaugurated by authors such as Lovato
37 Lovati (1240/41–1309) and Albertino Mussato (1261–1329). Christian
38 motives, however, started to intensify in Salutati's writings as soon as the
39 early 1370s. This process reached its peak in 1405–6, when Salutati defended

1 a Petrarchan notion of Christian humanism against the attacks leveled at the
2 *studia humanitatis* by Giovanni da San Miniato (1360–1428) and Giovanni
3 Dominici (1355/56–1419).⁵¹

4 In the same years—the last of his life—Salutati also exchanged with
5 Poggio a few heated letters concerning, among other things, the appraisal
6 of Petrarch’s intellectual heritage. Only the letters by Salutati are extant
7 and—it has been convincingly argued—they can be regarded as one of Brun-
8 ni’s sources for the composition of the *Dialogi*.⁵² The notion of Petrarch as a
9 model of Christian virtue lies at the heart of Salutati’s argument. In writing
10 to Poggio, Salutati confirms his assessment of the works by Petrarch and
11 insists on the poet’s Christianity as the conclusive proof of his superiority
12 over the whole lot of the gentiles. The main virtues that can be praised in an
13 author are two, Salutati affirms: *sapientia* and *eloquentia*. And, with regard
14 to *sapientia*, not only Petrarch, but even “a less than ordinarily learned man
15 of our times” surpasses the Ancients, who were not enlightened by the
16 knowledge of the Christian faith.⁵³ In terms of *eloquentia*, the style of the
17 Ancients was often more elegant than that of modern theologians, but it
18 was ultimately deceitful since its purpose was to cover the ignorance of the
19 Ancients. Salutati hence agreed with Petrarch: since words and things are
20 the subject matter of *eloquentia*, one cannot be truly eloquent unless he has
21 achieved a true (i.e., Christian) understanding of things.⁵⁴

22 Salutati’s insistence on Christianity and doctrinal orthodoxy as a
23 criterion of philosophical and literary excellence was not simply due to his
24 religious convictions. As stressed by Witt, Salutati found an authoritative
25 precedent for this kind of argument in Petrarch himself and, specifically, in
26 the *De ignorantia*. Distancing himself from the scholastic tradition, Petrarch
27 accused medieval philosophers of being learned “not in the law of Moses or
28 Christ, but in that of Aristotle” [non mosaica utique nec cristiana, sed aris-
29 totelica . . . in lege].⁵⁵ Completely submissive to the authority of Aristotle,
30 scholastic philosophers had not realized that, wise as he was, Aristotle was
31 only a man, and not only that but was also a gentile. Therefore, although he
32 discussed happiness at length in the *Ethics*, he was so ignorant of the real,
33 Christian happiness that “any devout old woman, or any faithful fisherman,
34 shepherd, or peasant, [quelibet anus pia, vel piscator pastorve fidelis, vel agri-
35 cola] is happier, if not more subtle, in recognizing it.”⁵⁶

36 These statements are relevant not only because they provided Salu-
37 tati with a model to follow in his apology for Petrarch, but also because they
38 characterized a specific conception of Christian humanism to which both
39 Petrarch and Salutati subscribed, at variance with the humanists belong-

1 ing to Bruni's generation.⁵⁷ In this regard, it is significant that Niccoli's
2 recantation in Book 2 should be devoid of all religious arguments for the
3 superiority of Petrarch over the Ancients, siding with Salutati instead on
4 the excellence of Petrarch both in poetry and prose (2.82).

5 A similar attitude characterizes Niccoli's eulogy of the other two
6 crowns of Florence as well. Dante is praised for the *sapientia* and *eloquen-*
7 *tia* displayed by his descriptions of the heavenly motions, by his arithmeti-
8 cal computations, and especially by his verses "in which he described love,
9 hatred, fear, and the other passions of the soul" [in quibus amorem, odium,
10 formidinem ceterasque animi perturbationes exprimit] (*Dialogi*, 2.73). By
11 the same token, in Book 2, Niccoli commends Boccaccio for his learning,
12 eloquence, elegance, and *ingenii praestantiam*, namely, the virtues that he
13 perceives in Boccaccio's genealogy of the gods, topological descriptions, and
14 historical and mythological biographies (2.87).

15 The encomium of the three crowns pronounced by Niccoli in Book
16 2 can be compared to Bruni's *Vite di Dante e Petrarca*, composed in 1436
17 during Bruni's chancellorship. Bruni at that time had stronger political rea-
18 sons to praise the three Tuscan poets than he did in 1406; however, the
19 core arguments that Bruni advances in the *Vite* are almost identical to those
20 presented in Book 2 of the *Dialogi*.⁵⁸ Most importantly, however, neither the
21 *Vite* nor Book 2 contain any reference to Petrarch or to Dante's Christianity
22 as an argument for their superiority over the Ancients.

23 24 **Bruni's cultural project**

25
26 As exemplified by Bruni's treatment of Salutati's cultural positions, the
27 dialectical structure of the *Dialogi* is subservient to an inclusivist ideal of
28 humanism that also inspires Niccoli's recantation in Book 2. Yet, we should
29 not automatically equate Bruni's cultural project with the positions advanced
30 in Book 2. These positions are integral to Bruni's ideal of humanism, but
31 they do not suffice to provide a complete picture of it. Bruni advances his
32 ideal of humanist culture by carefully orchestrating the relationship between
33 Book 1 and Book 2. Analysis of the *Dialogi* as a whole, then, should lead us
34 to a more nuanced, sophisticated understanding of Bruni's cultural project.

35 Granted that Niccoli's intransigent classicism and Bruni's ideal of
36 humanism are the main positions discussed in the *Dialogi*, one should not
37 forget that Bruni also takes into consideration two further cultural stances,
38 namely, the scholastic tradition and the early humanist culture emblemized
39 by Salutati. In these terms, we can read Book 1 as containing (1) an

1 explicit criticism of scholastic culture (advanced by Niccoli and never taken
2 back); (2) an implicit revision of Salutati's cultural assumptions, which are
3 accepted once rid of some of their original elements, such as the insistence
4 on Christianity as a standard of literary and philosophical excellence; and (3)
5 an implicit rejection of Niccoli's cultural stance. The resulting conception of
6 humanism proposed by Bruni entails all these conclusions. It markedly dif-
7 fers from Niccoli's exclusivist stances, but it incorporates Niccoli's criticism
8 of scholasticism. Most importantly, however, Bruni's ideal of culture, unlike
9 Niccoli's, does not indiscriminately reject all positions that do not fully con-
10 form to it. On the contrary, Bruni is open to views such as Salutati's, views
11 that, although not conforming perfectly to his cultural project, can be par-
12 tially revised and eventually adopted.

13 Bruni advances this moderate and inclusivist cultural program both
14 in the *Dialogi* and in other works. For example, Gary Ianziti has recently
15 demonstrated that Bruni's historical writings reflect a variety of historio-
16 graphical models that Bruni never embraces in toto, but rather reworks into
17 a new style of humanist history.⁵⁹ This inclusivist approach to sources is
18 also reflected by Bruni's *De studiis et litteris*, written in the 1420s. In this
19 long open letter, Bruni addresses Battista Malatesta, the wife of the Lord
20 of Pesaro, commending her for her scholarly virtues. These virtues, Bruni
21 writes, have driven him to pen his thoughts on topics that a woman should
22 explore. First of all, she should attain a wide and exhaustive familiarity with
23 many authors. Such knowledge should not be confined to a few canonical
24 books, in the style of modern theologians.⁶⁰ On the contrary, her *eruditio*
25 should embrace all the best authors, in all fields, from antiquity to the pres-
26 ent. For example, in the field of theology, she should read Lactantius, Augus-
27 tine, Jerome, Ambrose, Cyprian, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom,
28 and Basil of Caesarea. Besides, she should also read modern theologians,
29 even though she should mainly follow the example of the Ancients.⁶¹ In
30 brief, while Niccoli's cultural stance presupposed a careful selection of the
31 best classics, faithful adherence to their model, and rejection of all the rest,
32 Bruni's advice to Battista reads as an encouragement to discerningly expand
33 one's cultural horizons. To excel in culture, one should read all authors and
34 discriminate between the good and the bad in each of them. One should be
35 able to learn from the Ancients and to take what is good from the Moderns.

36 This inclusivist conception of culture and learning was supported
37 by some weighty authorities, including Basil of Caesarea, whose *Address to*
38 *the Youth* Bruni had translated into Latin in 1400–1401.⁶² In this letter to
39 the young, Basil insists that pagan knowledge is “not without usefulness for

1 the soul,” as demonstrated by Moses and Daniel, who were trained among
2 the Egyptians and the Babylonians before they turned to the study of the
3 true God.⁶³ The method that resulted from Basil’s suggestion is extremely
4 similar to that advised by Bruni in his *De studiis*. More precisely, it is a
5 method that, without rejecting any tradition on principle, relies on the read-
6 ers’ judgment to distinguish the good from the bad in all sources. In Basil’s
7 terms, Christian students should approach pagan literature in the way bees
8 approach flowers: by choosing the best alone and by taking only what they
9 need from them.⁶⁴

10 The moderate and inclusivist conception of culture emblemized
11 by Basil and advised by Bruni can be regarded, I believe, as Bruni’s most
12 important legacy for the history of humanism. Throughout the fifteenth
13 century, a moderate ideal of humanism comparable to Bruni’s coexisted
14 with an extremist one that closely resembled Niccoli’s. The cultural opposi-
15 tion represented in the *Dialogi* can thus be analyzed not only in the context
16 of Bruni’s works but also *a posteriori*, from the perspective of the humanist
17 debates that throughout the fifteenth century opposed a “Brunian” concep-
18 tion of humanism to a “Niccolian” one.⁶⁵ In light of this, we can better
19 understand the place occupied by Bruni’s *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum His-*
20 *trum* in the intellectual history of humanism.

21 Bruni’s work documents the development of the humanists’ aware-
22 ness not only of their own cultural identity as a group but also of the diver-
23 gences that set apart different cultural positions within the humanist group.
24 The significance of the *Dialogi* owes not only to its role in distinguishing
25 the humanist current from earlier or nonhumanist traditions. The *Dialogi*’s
26 importance also and especially owes to Bruni’s realization of the need to
27 choose between two concurrent alternatives that concerned the humanist
28 cultural project in general and specifically its degree of receptiveness to other
29 traditions.



32
33 **Notes**

- 34
35 1 See Patrick Baker, *Italian Renaissance: Humanism in the Mirror* (Cambridge: Cam-
36 bridge University Press, 2015), 281–90.
37 2 See in particular Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic*
38 *Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton,
39 N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955); Eugenio Garin, *Der italienische Humanis-*
mus (Bern: A. Francke, 1947); James Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Ital-*

1 *ian Renaissance*, vol. 1, *Humanism* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003);
2 James Hankins, ed., *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cam-
3 bridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian*
4 *Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Prince-
5 ton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of*
6 *Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
7 Press, 1978); Paolo Viti, *Leonardo Bruni e Firenze: Studi sulle lettere pubbliche e private*
(Roma: Bulzoni, 1992).

- 8 3 Dating the composition of the *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum* is one of the most
9 debated issues in the history of the interpretation of Bruni's works. Hans Baron
10 famously called into doubt the unity and coherency of the *Dialogi*. According to
11 Baron, Bruni wrote the first book of the *Dialogi* in 1401, advocating an attitude of
12 militant classicism, averse to all civic traditions, including that of the three crowns
13 (Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio). This stance clashed, however, with the "civic"
14 kind of humanism developed by Bruni after the death of Gian Galeazzo Visconti in
15 1402. Therefore, according to Baron, the second book of the *Dialogi* was written in
16 1403–4 or even later, in 1405–6, in order to rectify the positions previously defended
17 in Book 1. See Hans Baron, *Humanistic and Political Literature in Florence and Ven-*
18 *ice at the Beginning of the Quattrocento* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,
19 1955), 126, 154–55, 159. Baron's theory concerning a discrete composition of the *Dia-*
20 *logi* was accepted, in 1985, by Paolo Trovato, who suggested that Book 1 and Book
21 2 were composed in 1403 and 1406 respectively; see "Dai 'Dialogi ad Petrum His-
22 *trum*' alle 'Vite di Dante e del Petrarca': Appunti su Leonardo Bruni e la tradizione
23 trecentesca," *Studi Petrarqueschi* 2 (1985): 263–84, at 271–73. Baron's thesis (like the
24 ensuing scholarly debate) centered on the apparently contradictory character of the
25 two books that, together with a short poem, make up the whole text of the *Dialogi*.
26 At variance with Baron and Trovato, however, the majority of Bruni scholars have
27 argued for a roughly coeval composition of Book 1 and Book 2 in the years 1403–6
28 or—according to some—even later. Ronald G. Witt, for instance, dates the the *Dia-*
29 *logi* to 1408; see *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato*
30 *to Bruni* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 432–33. I myself strongly incline to date the *Dialogi*
31 as a whole around 1406, probably after the death of Salutati. This hypothesis is con-
32 firmed by many pieces of internal evidence. I agree, for instance, with Stefano Ugo
33 Baldassarri, who believes that the *Dialogi* must have been preceded by the epistolary
34 exchange in 1405–6 between Salutati and Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459); see Bal-
35 dassarri's introduction to his edition of Leonardo Bruni, *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum His-*
36 *trum* (Firenze: L. S. Olschki, 1994), 52–53, 61–62. I also agree with Trovato's sugges-
37 tion that Salutati's submissive characterization, especially in Book 2, would be hardly
38 explainable if Salutati had still been alive when the dialogue was composed (see Tro-
39 vato, "Dai 'Dialogi,'" 274–75). In addition to this, there is no strong evidence sug-
gesting that Book 1 should have been composed before 1406 since the fictional setting
of the dialogue on Easter 1401 needs not correspond to the year in which the *Dialogi*
were composed. See Riccardo Fubini, "All'uscita dalla Scolastica medievale: Salu-
tati, Bruni e i 'Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum,'" in *L'umanesimo italiano e i suoi*
storici: Origini rinascimentali, critica moderna (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2001), 75–103,

1 at 81–82; Trovato, “Dai ‘Dialogi,’” 268; Domenico Vittorini, “I *Dialogi ad Petrum*
2 *Histrum* di Leonardo Bruni Aretino (Per la storia del gusto nell’Italia del secolo XV),”
3 *PMLA* 55, no. 3 (1940): 714–20. Most importantly, however, Baron’s hypothesis fails
4 to account for the dialectical nature of the *Dialogi*, which, far from being incoherent,
5 can only be understood as a whole; see Gary Ianziti, “From Praise to Prose: Leonardo
6 Bruni’s Lives of the Poets,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 10 (2005): 127–48,
7 at 128.

8 4 Arthur Field, *The Intellectual Struggle for Florence: Humanists and the Beginnings of the*
9 *Medici Regime, 1420–1440* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

10 5 Baker, *Humanism in the Mirror*, 51.

11 6 See Fubini, “All’uscita dalla Scolastica medievale”; Riccardo Fubini, “Premesse tre-
12 centesche ai ‘Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum’ di Leonardo Bruni,” *Humanistica*
13 1, no. 1/2 (2006): 13–21; Lars Boje Mortensen, “Leonardo Bruni’s ‘Dialogus’: A Cice-
14 ronian Debate on the Literary Culture of Florence,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 37 (1986):
15 259–302; Carol E. Quillen, “The Uses of the Past in Quattrocento Florence: A Read-
16 ing of Leonardo Bruni’s *Dialogues*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 3 (2010):
17 363–85; David Quint, “Humanism and Modernity: A Reconsideration of Bruni’s
18 *Dialogues*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1985): 423–45.

19 7 Fubini, “All’uscita dalla Scolastica medievale,” 97, 100; Quillen, “Uses of the Past,”
20 367; Quint, “Humanism and Modernity,” 425.

21 8 Hankins, *Humanism*, 164–65; Quint, “Humanism and Modernity,” 445.

22 9 Leonardo Bruni, *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum*, ed. Baldassarri, 1.17. Further
23 citations of the *Dialogi* are to this edition, citing book and paragraph numbers. All
24 translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

25 10 See Francesco Bausi, “Nota sul procedimento antilogico nei ‘Dialogi’ di Leonardo
26 Bruni,” *Interpres: Rivista di Studi Quattrocenteschi* 12 (1992): 275–83, at 279–80;
27 Eugenio Garin, “A proposito di Coluccio Salutati,” *Rivista Critica di Storia della*
28 *Filosofia* 15, no. 1 (1960): 73–82, at 76; Eugenio Garin, “La cultura fiorentina nella
29 seconda metà del 300 e i ‘barbari britanni,’” *Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana* 64,
30 no. 2 (1960): 181–95; Mortensen, “Leonardo Bruni’s ‘Dialogus,’” 264, 296; Remigio
31 Sabbadini, “E. De Franco ‘I dialoghi al Vergerio’ di L. Bruni,” *Giornale Storico della*
32 *Letteratura Italiana* 96, no. 286 (1930): 129–33, at 131–32; Jerrold E. Seigel, “‘Civic
33 Humanism’ or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni,” *Past &*
34 *Present* 34, no. 1 (1966): 3–48, at 15–16; Quillen, “The Uses of the Past,” 366.

35 11 See Cicero, *De oratore*, in his *Rhetorica*, ed. A. S. Wilkins, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford
36 University Press, 19020, 1.263–64, 2.40.

37 12 See, among others, Fubini, “All’uscita dalla Scolastica medievale,” 88; Vittorini, “I
38 *Dialogi*,” 718–19.

39 13 Francesco Petrarca, *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, in his *Invectives*, ed. and
40 trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 2.11.

41 14 Cicero, *Brutus*, in his *Rhetorica*, ed. A. S. Wilkins, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University
42 Press, 1903), 139–44; *De oratore*, 1:213–14.

43 15 Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.350.

44 16 Poggio Bracciolini, *Oratio in funere Nicolai Nicoli*, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Riccardo
45 Fubini, Facsimile of the 1538 edition, vol. 1 (Torino: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1964), 271.

- 1 17 See Baker, *Humanism in the Mirror*, 281–90.
- 2 18 See Baron, *The Crisis*, 528–29; Martin C. Davies, “An Emperor without Clothes?
3 Niccolò Niccoli under Attack,” *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 30 (1987): 95–143, at
4 124; Mortensen, “Bruni’s ‘Dialogus,’” 269.
- 5 19 Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolario*, ed. Francesco Novati, 4 vols. in 5 (Roma: Fonzani e
6 C. Tipografi del Senato, 1891–1911), 4:131 (Ep. 14.19); and see Baldassarri, introduc-
7 tion to Bruni, *Dialogi*, 48–49; Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 398–99.
- 8 20 Leonardo Bruni, *Epistolarum libri VIII*, ed. James Hankins, 2 vols. (Roma: Edizioni
9 di storia e letteratura, 2007), 1:28 (Ep. 2.1); and see Iiro Kajanto, *Poggio Bracciolini
10 and Classicism: A Study in Early Italian Humanism* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeaka-
11 temia, 1987), 14.
- 12 21 Enea Silvio Piccolomini, *De viris illustribus*, ed. Adrianus van Heck (Città del Vati-
13 cano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1991), 35. The connection between the real
14 Niccoli and his fictional counterpart in Book 1 of the *Dialogi* is further proved by
15 evidence suggesting that early Quattrocento authors identified the statements con-
16 tained in Book 1 specifically as Niccoli’s. The first hint in this direction comes from
17 Guarino’s 1413 letter to Biagio Guasconi. Upon criticizing Niccoli’s refusal to write
18 anything in Latin, Guarino refers to Niccoli’s much-anticipated and only work, the
19 *Orthographia*. Niccoli, this *homo unius libri*, could only put forth a ludicrous treatise
20 “on the forms of the letters, the colors of papers, and the kinds of ink” [de literarum
21 formis, chartarum coloribus, atramentorum varietate]: “now, this really fits
22 that Horatian ‘Mountains will be in labor: a ridiculous mouse will be born!’” [hoc
23 vere Horatianum num illud est: “parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus”]. See
24 Guarino Veronese, *Epistolario di Guarino Veronese*, ed. Remigio Sabbadini (Vene-
25 zia: A spese della Società, 1915–19), 1:37–38 (Ep. 17). Sabbadini, in his comment to
26 Guarino’s epistles, denies Niccoli’s authorship of the *Orthographia*. Guarino’s asser-
27 tion could be independent of the text of Book 1; however, it is almost impossible not
28 to read Guarino’s quotation as a way of turning upon Niccoli the very expression he
29 had used in order to revile Petrarch’s *Africa* in Book 1. And, if this were the case, it
30 would necessarily imply that Guarino was not interpreting the character of Book 1 as
31 a purely fictional personage, but rather as the faithful representation of the real Nic-
32 coli, which he aimed to attack in his letter to Guasconi.
- 33 22 Bruni, *Dialogi*, 1.48. Concerning Salutati’s *Metra*, see Marcello Aurigemma, “I
34 giudizi sul Petrarca e le idee letterarie di Coluccio Salutati,” *Arcadia, Accademia letter-
35 aria italiana: Atti e Memorie* 6, no. 4 (1975–76): 67–145,” at 76–77.
- 36 23 Concerning Poggio’s classicism, see Field, *Struggle for Florence*, 276–319; Kajanto,
37 *Bracciolini*.
- 38 24 Poggio Bracciolini, *Lettere I: Lettere a Niccolò Niccoli*, ed. Helene Harth (Firenze:
39 Olschki, 1984), 119 (Ep. 44).
- 40 25 “Traditional culture” has been recently analyzed by Field, *Struggle for Florence*,
41 75–126.
- 42 26 Field, *Struggle for Florence*, 77. While Boccaccio was probably considered a nonhu-
43 manist by certain enclaves within early fifteenth-century culture (including the tra-
44 ditionalist one), authors such as Salutati or Gioannozzo Manetti perceived him as
45 belonging to the humanist tradition.

- 1 27 Giovanni Gherardi da Prato, *Il Paradiso degli Alberti*, ed. Antonio Lanza (Roma:
2 Salerno, 1975), 2:299–301, 3:12–19.
- 3 28 Concerning these invectives, see Antonio Lanza, *Polemiche e berte letterarie nella*
4 *Firenze del primo Quattrocento* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1972), 19–101.
- 5 29 Domenico Da Prato, “Prefazione alle Rime,” in Lanza, *Polemiche*, 241.
- 6 30 Field, *Struggle for Florence*, 155.
- 7 31 Bruni, *Dialogi*, 1:31; Field, *Struggle for Florence*, 154.
- 8 32 Mortensen, “Bruni’s ‘Dialogus,’” 279–80.
- 9 33 See Bruni, *Dialogi*, 1:33–36; Bruni, “De studiis et litteris,” in his *Opere letterarie e*
10 *politiche*, ed. Paolo Viti (Torino: Utet, 1996), 550–51.
- 11 34 Quint, “Humanism and Modernity,” 445.
- 12 35 See Field, *Struggle for Florence*, 153, 264.
- 13 36 See Leonardo Bruni, “Vita Ciceronis,” in *Opere*, 418.
- 14 37 Hankins, *Humanism*, 163–64; Viti, *Leonardo Bruni e Firenze*, 315–16.
- 15 38 Leonardo Bruni, *Oratio in nebulonem maledicum*, in *Opere*, 335. Further citations of
16 Viti’s edition of Bruni’s *Oratio in nebulonem maledicum* are given parenthetically in
17 the text by page number. A further document of Bruni’s anti-Niccolian stances is pro-
18 vided by Bruni in his poem “In Nicolaum Nihil” (see Hankins, *Humanism*, 166–69).
- 19 39 Quint, “Humanism and Modernity,” 436.
- 20 40 Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 319–20.
- 21 41 Witt, 319.
- 22 42 Salutati, *Epistolario*, 4:138 (Ep. 14.19); and see Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*,
23 400.
- 24 43 Fubini, “Premesse trecentesche ai ‘Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum,’” 14.
- 25 44 This intellectual attitude toward Salutati’s cultural positions probably reflects the
26 nature of Bruni’s personal relationship with the elder chancellor of Florence. Saluta-
27 ti’s guidance had been essential for the development of Bruni’s cultural program, even
28 though Bruni’s program belonged to a Weltanschauung that was sensibly different
29 from Salutati’s (see Hankins, *Humanism*, 143–44).
- 30 45 Fubini, “All’uscita dalla Scolastica medievale,” 84–85.
- 31 46 Marsili and Salutati also knew Petrarch personally and corresponded with him.
- 32 47 See Aurigemma, “I giudizi sul Petrarca,” 68.
- 33 48 Salutati, *Epistolario*, 1:337–38, 341–42 (Ep. 4.20). Further praises of Petrarch are con-
34 tained in another letter by Salutati, addressed to Lodovico degli Alidosi and written
35 between 1399 and 1402 (see Aurigemma, “I giudizi sul Petrarca Petrarca,” 111).
- 36 49 Aurigemma, “I giudizi sul Petrarca Petrarca,” 96–97, 113–14.
- 37 50 Aurigemma, “I giudizi sul Petrarca Petrarca,” 122; Witt, *In the Footsteps of the*
38 *Ancients*, 334–35.
- 39 51 Salutati, *Epistolario*, 4:170–240; Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 299–300,
334–37.
- 52 Baldassarri, introduction to Bruni, *Dialogi*, 50; Fubini, “All’uscita dalla Scolastica
medievale,” 86–87.
- 53 Salutati, *Epistolario*, 4:134–35, 144, 163–64 (Ep. 14.19, 22).
- 54 Salutati, *Epistolario*, 4:136–37 (Ep. 14.19); and see Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*,
256–57.

- 1 55 Petrarca, “De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia,” in *Invectives*, 2.19.
2 56 Petrarca, 4.48–49; and see also 2.26, 4.73–76, 5.127–28.
3 57 Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 392.
4 58 See Leonardo Bruni, “Vite di Dante e del Petrarca,” in *Opere*, 550–51, 554–57.
5 59 See Gary Ianziti, “Challenging Chronicles: Leonardo Bruni’s ‘History of the Flo-
6 rentine People,’” in *Chronicling History: Chroniclers and Historians in Medieval and*
7 *Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sharon Dale, Alison Williams Lewin, and Duane J. Osheim
8 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 248–72; and Ianziti,
9 *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Cam-
10 bridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).
11 60 Bruni, “De studiis et litteris,” in *Opere*, 250.
12 61 Bruni, 260.
13 62 Concerning Bruni’s interest for Basil’s *Address to the Youth*, see Christopher Celenza,
14 *The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance: Language, Philosophy, and the Search*
15 *for Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 72–73.
16 63 Basil, *Pros tous neous*, in his *Letters*, ed. and trans. Ron J. Deferrari and M. R. P.
17 McGuire (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 3.3–4.1.
18 64 Basil, 4.8.
19 65 To take one example, one can think of the famous controversies that arose in the mid-
20 1440s between Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) and Bartolomeo Facio (ca. 1405–1457)
21 and, in the early 1450s, between Valla and Poggio.
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