10 Pagan *Humanitas* in the Imperial Age: Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of his study on the perceptions and representations of Roman republican age during the first century of the Empire, Gowing claims:

> While it may be historically practical and neat to mark the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Principate with the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC or the battle of Actium in 31 BC, it took well over a century for the idea and the ideals of the Republic to be purged from the Roman imagination and memory (though they would never be purged entirely).[1]

No doubt *humanitas* is one of those originally republican ideals that "would never be purged entirely", at least until the late fourth century CE. On the contrary, the main novelty of this book is to have revealed how important the concept of *humanitas* was in some periods of the imperial age, often by the very fact of evoking a socio-political climate which had characterised the last fight for freedom under the Republic. This is certainly the case of the Trajanic as well as of the Theodosian age, where Pliny's and Symmachus' use of *humanitas* both in official works like the panegyrics or the *relationes* served the purpose of spreading the idea that new eras had begun, inspired by ideals such as *humanitas*, which should guarantee more respect of human dignity than the ages that had just ended. In short, once again after Cicero, *humanitas* was used as a programmatic and propaganda word. To this end a significant contribution also came from historical works such as those of Tacitus, Ammianus, or the other fourth-century minor historians which belonged to the same ages as Pliny and Symmachus, and which characterised previous times as lacking *humanitas*. It is true that our sources are limited, and those which I have taken into account in this study are mainly literary; yet Pliny's and Symmachus' letters above all are likely to express not only their own values, but also those embraced by the social class to which they belonged – or at least by its majority –, namely, the senatorial class, which came second after the emperor in terms of socio-political influence.

The reasons why Pliny and Symmachus resorted to *humanitas* as a binding value do not only lie however in what the term echoed from an historical viewpoint, but also in the multifacetedness of its meanings. Regardless of the doubts raised by today's linguists on its etymology, in ancient times, from Cicero and Gellius on, the noun *humanitas* was linked to *homo*, 'human being', thus focusing on man and representing the fulfilment of human nature: in this respect, it is telling

1 Gowing 2005, 3.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111510507-010

that comparatives and superlatives of *humanus*, as this book has contributed to show, are preferred over its positive grade to render *humanitas*. The focus on man is the deciding factor in the political uses of *humanitas*, as the idea that is conveyed is that all human beings are potentially involved in reciprocal relationships. Thus, although in the end Pliny and Symmachus used *humanitas* to strengthen the bonds within the social classes to which they belonged, the notion itself potentially transcended class distinctions and could therefore also work to bridge gaps upwards, with the emperor, and downwards, with the equestrian order and the lower echelons of Roman society. After all, it is for this very reason that Cicero had given pride of place to this value concept, as it was probably the aptest to foster his idea of *consensus omnium bonorum*, the political harmony of all good men, which, in Cicero's view, would save the Roman republic from destruction. So that all good men, irrespective of their initial social conditions, might play an important role for the *res publica*, *humanitas* needed to be something which could be acquired, for example through the study of the liberal arts: hence its connotation of παιδεία. At the same time, education could not be an end in itself, but had to elevate man from an ethical viewpoint: hence its connotation of φιλανθρωπία. Pliny and, in his footsteps, Symmachus understood the potential benefits deriving from this polysemy of the term and exploited it as Cicero had done. Eumenius and Ausonius, so far as we can understand from the few occurrences of *humanitas* in their works, did something similar, albeit on a smaller scale.

After all, if we think of the other value or abstract concepts which we have seen are sometimes mentioned alongside *humanitas* or instead of it, we understand even better why Pliny's and Symmachus' choices fell upon it. Take for example *clementia*. Even leaving aside the 'tyrannical' connotation it probably acquired after its public uses during the reigns of Nero and Domitian – which is likely to explain the decrease of frequency of its instances in the aftermath of their reigns, as the charts in the Introduction have shown –, the term itself presupposes a downward relationship between the condition of its bestower and that of its recipient. As a consequence, this cannot be presented as a socially transversal, let alone as a potentially egalitarian concept, not to say that it lacks the educational component, and therefore the polysemy, of *humanitas*. Or take also *urbanitas*, another value concept which is sometimes linked to *humanitas*. It can share with some occurrences of *humanitas* the idea of 'refinement', but the term itself evokes *urbs*, a city, if not *Vrbs*, the city *par excellence*, namely Rome, thereby implying the opposition between the educated, civilized, polished inhabitants of big cities, Rome especially, and the less educated, less civilized and less polished inhabitants of the countryside. As is evident, this concept too would hardly be even potentially socially inclusive. By the same token, a word like *doctrina* necessarily implies education, but does not imply an ethical connotation,

and the exclusion of the moral component would be too much of a loss in the political field.

The comparison with these abstract concepts – but the list could be brought forward – also contributes to explaining why *humanitas* can be used with reference to non-Romans (and non-Greeks), as in Tacitus and Ammianus. Despite the fact that the Romans usually regarded themselves as the best in the world, and therefore usually considered *humanitas* one of their distinctive qualities on which they prided themselves, this is not necessarily so, as Tacitus shows both in the *Agricola* and *Germania*, where only two occurrences of the term are sufficient to call into question not only the idea of exporting civilization, but the Roman idea of civilization itself: the *humanitas* of the barbarians could be less barbaric than that of the Romans. The instance at *Agricola* 21.3, in particular, is perfect to show that the polysemy of *humanitas* results in its ambiguity and polyvalency: depending on what notions (the primary παιδεία and φιλανθρωπία, and their offshoots 'refinement', Latin language, attire, etc.) one includes or excludes, and in what measure they are perceived as present in each and every occurrence of the term, *humanitas* can be understood in one way or another. And this in turn explains why at times we find *humanitas* alongside other words which serve to explain better its meaning, at other times not: it depends on the author's willingness to be clear or, vice versa, to exploit the polysemy and ambiguity of *humanitas*.

Granted, another way to be clear about one's own understanding of *humanitas* is to spell it out, as Gellius does in the famous passage of *Noctes Atticae* 13.17, although in the end the cultural programme he wants to promote inevitably acquires an ethical component as well. Gellius' political influence during the Antonine age was not as high as that of Pliny and Symmachus in the Trajanic and Theodosian ages respectively, and yet he fights his battle against those who did not seem to understand, and therefore appreciate, the true value of *humanitas*. Indeed, if we look at [Quintilian's] *Declamationes Minores* and *Maiores*, we can better understand Gellius' criticism.

On the other hand, since public oratory suffered a crisis in the imperial age, as revealed by Quintilian, and by Tacitus in the *Dialogus*, it was probably to be expected that the Ciceronian use of *humanitas* in oratorical contexts would lose some of its weight: it looks as if *humanitas* was still used as an argument because of its illustrious tradition, but the educational component and the broader socio-political and cultural programme it implied in Cicero were out of place, and consequently its effectiveness decreased. This eventually resulted – at least in schools and during the second century CE – in the impoverishment of the polysemy of *humanitas* noted by Gellius, which Apuleius' fake trial in *Metamorphoses* 3 and the *Apologia* seem to confirm – although Apuleius' argumentative use of *humanitas* is far more elaborated than that in the declamations.

Taken to the extreme, the fact that some potential components can be left out from occurrences of *humanitas* leads to the case of Firmicus Maternus, where we encounter a kind of civilization which surprisingly disregards education in that it depends on the stars and their influence. And the benevolent attitude some men or peoples sometimes show is again due to the stars.

Even more a radical reinterpretation of *humanitas* is offered by the *Asclepius*, which goes as far as to intertwine the human quality *par excellence* with what is apparently at its farthest from it, *diuinitas*. As we have seen, the *Asclepius* stands out for its uniqueness, since it seems to ignore the long history of *humanitas* as well as all its socio-political implications. And yet the noun itself is employed very often to indicate man's highest nature, which only human beings inspired by God can achieve. If the divine bond is lost, the noun *humanitas* loses most of its ennobling meaning and comes to indicate man with all his weaknesses. In reinvesting *humanitas* with this fluid meaning, which oscillates between a more and a less noble understanding of man, the author of the *Asclepius* therefore obtains the paradoxical result of summing up the entire history of *humanitas* while neglecting it altogether: it is sufficient to substitute the 'divine' with the liberal arts to understand that, not unlike Cicero in the *Pro Archia*, he shows man the path through which he can realise himself.

But perhaps most important, the relationship between *humanitas* and *diuinitas* which emerges from the *Asclepius* enables us to complete the picture involving *humanitas* and the abstract concepts which are ontologically closest to it. The opposition of *humanitas* to *superbia* and/or *diuinitas* we observed in Pliny the Younger's *Panegyricus* now seems to appear clearer, for we end up facing a sort of triangle (or rather an asymmetric square), with *diuinitas* and *superbia* representing its upper vertices: right from their etymologies, which connect them with gods, they evoke attitudes which are hierarchically superior to what is allowed to man, but *diuinitas* indicates the positive side, that is, the inevitable possession of higher qualities, whereas *superbia* the negative one, namely the superior behaviour of those who regard themselves as better than others. At the base of the triangle lies *humanitas*, but it actually needs to be split into two: one, altogether positive, stands in opposition to *superbia*; the other, being opposed to *diuinitas*, indicates man's nature, which is inevitably inferior to god's, but not necessarily negative. It is therefore in its socio-political and cultural dimension, which abundantly prevails in the Latin authors I have investigated in this book, that *humanitas* is defined by the notions of παιδεία, φιλανθρωπία and their offshoots, the ones which are considered the best to counter *superbia*. This discourse, and the relationship between *humanitas* and *diuinitas* in particular, is likely to be of great importance to Christian thought, and should be the focus of another book.