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# “Humanism” in Two Acts: Motoori Norinaga, Lorenzo Valla, and the Competing Historiographies of Humanist Modernity

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## Abstract

Lorenzo Valla was an Italian thinker and polemicist who is today considered one of the founding figures of humanism, or the reconfiguration of Western society on more rational-secularist principles against the political influence of the Catholic Church. As part of this reconfiguration, Valla advocated critical approaches to the ancient canon, overcoming what Valla saw as the Scholastic corruption of the Latin language and restoring it to its original eloquence. Motoori Norinaga was a Japanese thinker and philosopher of religion and language who is associated with Kokugaku, or the attempt by intellectuals to evince an awareness of Japan as a distinct politico-cultural entity. To do this, Norinaga, like Valla in many ways, advocated critical approaches to the ancient canon, in particular a native Japanese-language (*Yamato kotoba*) reading of old texts written in Chinese characters. Norinaga and other Kokugaku thinkers also wanted to attenuate the sway of Buddhism, Confucianism, and other non-Japanese schools in favor of more Japanese ways of engaging with both the physical and the metaphysical. By eliminating Chinese influences, Norinaga thought, Japan could achieve greater awareness of itself as a country distinct from her continental neighbor. Today, however, while Valla is remembered as an important early humanist, Norinaga (and the Kokugaku intellectual tradition of which he is a part) are sometimes looked at askance in Western histories as a forerunner of twentieth-century “fascism”.

**Keywords:** humanism; Lorenzo Valla; Motoori Norinaga; fascism; pre-modernity; Japan

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Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) was an Italian thinker and polemicist who is today considered one of the founding figures of humanism, or the reconfiguration of Western society on rational-secularist principles against the political influence of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> As part of this reconfiguration, Valla advocated critical approaches to the ancient canon, overcoming what Valla saw as the Scholastic, medieval corruption of the Latin language and restoring it to its original eloquence (see, e.g., Library of Congress, nd). For example, Valla applied textual analysis to the Donation of Constantine, the document purporting to show that the Emperor Constantine (272-337) had ceded authority to the pope.<sup>2</sup> Valla’s conclusion was that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery, a conclusion which modern scholarship has reaffirmed (Ishizaka, 1991, p. 608). While Valla was not anti-religious, he was a proponent of questioning the bases of religious (and also political) authority. For Valla, resetting society on a firm basis required returning to the ancient sources and critically engaging with Western, in particular classical Roman, tradition.

Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) was a Japanese thinker and philosopher of religion who is associated with Kokugaku, or the Tokugawa era-attempt to evince an awareness of Japan as a distinct politico-cultural

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1 A modified version of this paper appeared earlier in Japanese translation. See Morgan (2022). I wish to thank the anonymous Interface reviewers who suggested revisions and the addition of sources and explications.

2 “In [the Donation of Constantine], it was alleged that the Emperor Constantine had recognized the Pope as Christ’s vicar on earth and made all bishops subject to him; that he had bestowed on the Pope the rank and ceremonial dress of an emperor, and on the Roman clergy those of the senate; and that he had made over the imperial palace of the Lateran to the Pope, together with the government of Rome and all Italy.” Davis (1970, p. 135).

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entity (Kishimoto, 1965, pp. 3-15; Ienaga et al., 1966, pp. 14-15; Usuda, 1943). To do this, Norinaga, like Valla in many ways, advocated critical approaches to the ancient canon, in particular a native Japanese-language (*Yamato kotoba*) reading of texts written in kanbun, or Chinese characters (see Bilimoria, 2012, p. 16; Iwasawa, 2011). By eliminating the Chinese influence from Japanese culture and intellectual discourse, Norinaga thought, Japan could achieve greater independence and awareness of itself as a country distinct from her continental neighbor. Norinaga was also not anti-religious. He had deeply held religious beliefs and saw his work as, in part, a return to the spiritual fundamentals of Japanese civilization. Norinaga thought that by clearing away the overgrowth, as it were, which had accumulated during the long period of Chinese influence in Japan and returning to the true, native Japanese (Yamato) readings of ancient texts, Japan could develop a sense of what is now called “national identity,” an awareness of Japan as a country following a linguistic and spiritual path unrelated to continental states such as the Chinese dynasties.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, Valla and Norinaga appear to have been embarked on similar projects. Both were linguistic reformers. For both, linguistic reform was connected to a reorientation of religious belief. For both, there were distinct political valences to their insistence on older ways of reading and writing language. Both also opened up, at least indirectly, intellectual pathways to participation in government by more than just institutional elites (Matsumoto, 1976, p. 216). While there are many dissimilarities between Norinaga and Valla, in their approach to the ancient texts of their own cultural milieux they were very much alike. And yet, Valla is often seen as a bold opponent to Scholasticism, a champion of truth against the unthinking truisms, linguistic tangles, and historiographical forgeries of his time. Valla as a father of humanism is typical of many of his treatments in current scholarly studies. While he was not embarked on a secularist project by any means, Norinaga, on the other hand, is almost never, as far as I have been able to determine, credited with founding a humanism in Japan.<sup>4</sup>

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3 See Muraoka (1957, pp. 220-221).

4 On the variety of meanings of “humanism” in Japanese intellectual life, see Campagnola (2018, pp. 535-559). For a brief review of works by J.G.A. Pocock, Anthony Grafton, and other “humanism”

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In fact, while Valla is remembered as an important early humanist, Norinaga, and the Kokugaku with which he is associated, are sometimes looked at askance in Western histories as forerunners of twentieth-century “fascism”.<sup>5</sup> This tendency traces back to postwar liberal and prominent political science scholar Maruyama Masao (1914-1996). Maruyama found much to recommend in Norinaga’s “optimism” about human nature (Maruyama, 1952, pp. 169-171), finding in this a kind of universalism shared by all (Maruyama, 1998a, pp. 212-213). Maruyama is also not dismissive of one of Norinaga’s main themes, namely *mono-no-aware* (on this idea, see the “Motoori Norinaga” section below).<sup>6</sup> But on the larger reading, Maruyama places Norinaga and Kokugaku more broadly in the intellectual development leading to mid-twentieth-century political developments, including fascism (Maruyama, 1952, pp. 268-269; Maruyama, 1998b, pp. 294-298; Maruyama, 1998a, p. 226; Foulk 2016, p. 31, but see also p. 63).<sup>7</sup> In turn, the influence of Maruyama’s work on Western scholars, especially in English translation, is profound.

Maruyama is not the only modern researcher to write on Norinaga, to be sure. Scholar of philology and religion Muraoka Tsunetsugu (1884-1946), for instance, rescued Norinaga from historiographical obscurity in the late Meiji era (Mizuno, 2018, p. 81), writing positively about Norinaga and his contributions to Kokugaku thought (Muraoka, 1930, p. 97). However, in doing so, Muraoka opened himself to criticisms by other, later scholars (especially post-Maruyama), who saw Norinaga’s conflation of philological scholarship and credulity toward myth as problematic (Mizuno, 2018, p. 89). Intellectual historian Koyasu Nobukuni has been particularly critical of Muraoka. Koyasu saw, in the

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historians in the West and the place of humanism in Western scholarship and cultural awareness, see Wang (2008, pp. 492-496).

5 And not only Western histories. Japanese Marxist Karatani Kōjin finds unnerving Bruno Taut’s (1880-1938) “affirm[ation]” of Norinaga’s views. See Karatani trans. Murphy, 2001, paragraph 29. For glimpses into how Norinaga was viewed inside of anti-modernist circles during the mid Shōwa period, see Koyasu (2008, pp. 89-92, 158-161), and Matsumoto (1976, p. 39). On Kaneko Mitsuharu (1895-1975), see Tankha, 2021, paragraph 46.

6 See Koyasu (1977, pp. 41-51), for an example of how *mono-no-aware* can function to offset the individual through private emotions in a way I read as similar to some humanists’ emphasis on the individual over the organization (see also, e.g., Kamei 1975, p. 234). See also Koyasu (1992, pp. 194-200), Muraoka (1928, pp. 176-181), Nosco (1990), and Flueckiger (2011, p. 14). For a more complex view, see Burns (1992).

7 Maruyama traces much of the trouble through critic Kobayashi Hideo (1902-1983) (Otohe, 2023).

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cohort of Japanese intellectual historians of whom the Norinaga specialist Muraoka formed a central part, the historiographical foundations of “the period of Shōwa fascism” (*Shōwa fashizumu ki*) (Koyasu, 2000, p. 114, cf. also pp. 175, 199). In a 1989 essay and 1995 book, Koyasu puzzles over what he calls the “Norinaga problem” (*Norinaga mondai*), invoking what Koyasu sees as related attempts to distinguish Martin Heidegger from his National Socialist sympathies by way of critiquing Muraoka for failing to appreciate the political pitfalls of Norinaga’s writings (Koyasu 1995).

On balance, then, Norinaga is often seen as having brought Japan under the sway of dangerous, proto-nationalistic thinking. By the same token, some scholars, both in Japan and in other countries, see Kokugaku as the forerunner to twentieth-century fascism.<sup>8</sup> Norinaga’s attempts to reform the written language and to critically investigate the received historiographical wisdom of his day, while considerably more aesthetically committed than those of Valla, are not credited with situating Japan on a trajectory toward a modernity which had made a healthy break with stultifying medieval traditions. Instead, Norinaga is seen as an unfortunate cultural chauvinist, and his Kokugaku as a wrong turn leading, eventually, to the civilizational disaster of the 1930s and 40s.

But why is this the case? If we accept Lorenzo Valla as a founder of humanism and situate him amid the humanistic stirrings of what would become High Modernism in Italy, then we cannot easily exempt him, except perhaps by special pleading, from responsibility for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the rise of Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) (although we will be able to enlist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in making our case, as we shall see below). Of course, such a strained causal relationship requires far too much historical flattening, even distortion, to be convincing. Valla did not suggest invading north Africa (although the Roman civilization he lauded was no stranger to that project). He also did not call for a Duce to lord it over the Italians (although, again, Roman antiquity fills in many of the gaps in the argument). Howev-

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8 Nationalism also comes in for such a treatment, being linked to one of several Tokugawa schools of thought. See, e.g., George M. Wilson’s views on Kita Ikki (1883-1937) and the Mito School, Rangaku, and Jitsugaku, glossed in Pyle, (1971, p. 6).

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er, when Western, and especially American, scholars study Japan, they sometimes make an analogous leap, from Norinaga and Kokugaku to intimations of Manchukuo and Pearl Harbor. Valla as humanist, then, but Norinaga and his Kokugaku as darkly prefiguring the Second World War. In this paper, I investigate why two paradigms of humanism have met such different historiographical interpretations.

### 1 Lorenzo Valla

Lorenzo Valla was born in the first decade of the fifteenth century in Italy, probably Rome (Nauta, 2021). It was a time and place of great intellectual ferment. Valla was raised in a world of religion and politics, and the tension between them. The nephew of a Vatican functionary, Valla was court philologist to Nicholas V (1397-1455) and later apostolic secretary under Calixtus III (1378-1458), and was also widely known as a polemicist and maverick who cut new trails out of what he saw as the sterility of late Scholastic discourse (Kenny, 2010, pp. 492-493); but see also (Celenza, 2004, pp. S66-S67).

On the one hand, given his opposition to Scholasticism, Valla would seem to have been a religious skeptic. For example, he is perhaps most famous today for having used textual analysis to debunk the so-called Donation of Constantine, the eighth- or ninth-century document—a forgery, Valla proved—purporting to effect the Emperor Constantine’s ceding of authority ecclesial and secular to the pope (Celenza, 2004, pp. S76-S77). Valla used early humanist philological techniques—later greatly improved by men such as Agostino Steuco (1497-1548) and Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494)—to discredit the so-called Donation.<sup>9</sup> Valla, according to contemporary scholar Maude Vanhaelen, “question[ed] the political, religious and theological ideology of his time” (Vanhaelen, 2015, p. 648).

Valla was not at all anti-religious, though (Blum, 2005, p. 486). For

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<sup>9</sup> See Delph (1966, pp. 55-77) for a good overview of the controversy surrounding Valla’s initial foray into the philological critique of the Donation.

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Valla, Vanhaelen continues, the crowning of Constantine “as the first Christian emperor signified the end of authentic evangelism and the start of what Valla saw as the fundamentally wrong union between imperial power (*imperium*) and the Gospel’s spiritual message (*evangelium*)” (Vanhaelen, 2015, p. 648). And as Ian Hunter notes in passing, Valla used his knowledge of ancient languages “for confessional purposes,” such as in “Valla’s unmasking of the Pseudo-Dionysius” (Hunter, 2014, pp. 338-339). Nancy Struever points out that what was important for Valla was not so much his having disproved the Donation of Constantine, as that this overturning of received wisdom was “exemplary of the Humanist discipline that rearranges the hierarchy in the Trivial arts; rhetoric is first, then grammar, then dialectic; here grammar and rhetoric are intricately in the philology that is the instrument of Humanist hermeneutic” (Struever, 2004, p. S49). What Valla was, then, in retrospect and by his own lights at the time, was a humanist (see Barsella, 2004, pp. S121-S122).

Humanism was a complex and multi-valent phenomenon, but most Humanists were united in their skepticism of the Scholastic institutionalism of their day and eager to re-found contemporary society on other bases (see Rabil, 2001, pp. 914-927). Contemporary Italian scholar Marco Sgarbi says that, according to “one school of thought,” the Humanists of the Renaissance “were men of letters, textual scholars, and orators, but certainly not philosophers” (Sgarbi, 2011, p. 876). Sgarbi then intervenes in this assessment, introducing a book by Lodi Nauta arguing that Lorenzo Valla was an important Renaissance philosopher in his own right (Sgarbi, 2011, p. 876). Also, although she is speaking of Venice in the 1400s, scholar Virginia Cox argues that “those born in the first three decades of the fifteenth century” comprised the “second generation of humanistically-educated patricians,” heralding a “change in institutional attitudes to humanistic education within the republic [i.e., Venice]” (Cox, 2003, p. 675, citing King, 1986, pp. 225-231).

Valla’s focus on language is not at all surprising, then, for language was at the center of the Humanists’ project (but see Monfasani, 1989, pp. 309-323, cited also in Marsh, 1997, p. 591). For example, independent

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scholar Karin Susan Fester explains that fellow scholar Alan Perreiah understands “late medieval and early Renaissance scholars” to have been seeking “to recover or invent a language that was pure and truthful in the way of Adam’s original tongue” (Fester, 2016, p. 112, citing p. 16 in Perreiah). Valla, according to Perreiah, thought that classical Latin, the Latin of Quintilian (ca. 35-100), was “the perfect language” and “indispensable for competent thought” (Fester, 2016, p. 115, citing pp. 43 and 60 in Perreiah).<sup>10</sup> Valla eventually arrived at what Perreiah describes as “essentially a linguistic-determinist conception of thought, language and reality,” according to which the “words and grammar of a language *constitute* the concepts that they express” (Fester, 2016, p. 116, citing p. 60 in Perreiah; emphasis in original). Philosopher and intellectual historian Peter A. Redpath also notes that:

Valla locates the content of abstract general ideas in original linguistic usage. Purportedly, we find original truth in original historical usage. ‘For this contains the hidden, or prefigured meaning which transcends the meaning which exists in books.’ And original truth grounds all human learning.

(Redpath, nd, np, citing Redpath, 1997, p. 106).<sup>11</sup>

This kind of linguistic investigation was common during and before Valla’s time. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), for example, “believe[d] in an essential connection of some kind between *res* and *verbum*,” although Erasmus also held “to the Platonic view that this connection is always necessarily inadequate, that there can be an approach but never an arrival at complete meaning through human language” (Barnett, 1996, p. 542, citing inter alia Erasmus trans. Fantazzi, 1988, p. 32 and Erasmus 1969, pp. 132, 128-150, 248).<sup>12</sup> For Erasmus, the summative position of the Word, the Logos, the Christ inside and outside of history, rendered human language reflective, at best, of ultimate reality. Like Valla, “Erasmus undeniably saw the task of purifying the material text of Scripture from the contaminations of history as an act of piety, a

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<sup>10</sup> Quintilian was not the only Roman author lauded by the Renaissance humanists. See, e.g., Leeds (2004, pp. 107-148).

<sup>11</sup> On Valla’s philological projects, see also Fubini (trans. King, 2003, pp. 36-42).

<sup>12</sup> On Christ as Word, or Logos, see Barnett, 1996, p. 550, citing Erasmus (1933, p. 211).

step toward restoring the full capacity of Scripture to act on its readers. He seems to look, sometimes quite literally, for a purer text that dwells beneath the corruptions and ill-conceived corrections visited on the palimpsests with which he worked” (Barnett, 1996, p. 561, citing *inter alia* Erasmus trans. Mynors and Thomson, 1974, lines 44-55; see also Nauta, 2012, pp. 31-66 and Spade and Panaccio 2019).<sup>13</sup> So, while Valla’s researches into religious history and linguistic and philological analysis were sometimes fraught with Humanist, that is to say secularist and individualist, tendencies, Valla was in no way a secularist. And neither was Motoori Norinaga.

## **2 Motoori Norinaga**

Motoori Norinaga was, like Lorenzo Valla, a philologist (Muraoka, 1930, pp. 97-102).<sup>14</sup> Norinaga was born in Matsuzaka, in Ise Province, today known as Mie Prefecture. In 1752 he began studying medicine in Kyoto, and Confucianism under Hori Keizan (1689-1757) (Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, 2011, p. 472). Motoori was influenced by the hermeneutic approach of renowned Tokugawa era-scholar Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) and the Buddhist priest Keichū (1640-1701), and was a student of Kamo no Mabuchi (1697-1769), an advocate of returning to the ancient Japanese language (Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, 2011, p. 472; Teeuwen, 2011, pp. 458-459; Brownlee, 1988, p. 36). Unlike Sorai, though, who attached governmental importance to ritual, especially Confucian ritual, Norinaga was concerned with words and the connections among humans, the gods, and the natural world which words embodied and engendered (Shogimen, 2002, pp. 497-523). Norinaga did not want to perpetuate the Confucian legitimization of the Tokugawa state. He wanted to recast Japanese spiritual and intellectual life on native grounds, without any continental influence whatsoever.

Norinaga later became associated with Kokugaku, often rendered into

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<sup>13</sup> Given the date and letter number of the correspondence cited, Barnett may mean to cite Erasmus trans. Mynors and Thomson (1976).

<sup>14</sup> Speaking of Ogyū Sorai, Richard H. Minear writes, “He who would study the Way must be a sophisticated philologist.” (Minear, 1976, p. 39)

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English as “national learning,” but closer in spirit to a *ressourcement* and rethinking of continental influence (see generally Burns, 2003; McNally, 2005; Janti, 2012, pp. 91-117). Much like the Italian Renaissance, the Kokugaku movement was not, aspirationally at least, nationalist. Kokugaku scholars were not concerned with founding a modern nation-state—the thing did not even exist yet, after all. Kokugaku was, instead, a project of revisiting ancient sources and resurrecting linguistic modes which the Kokugaku philologists and political thinkers thought lay buried beneath foreign—Chinese—overlayerings (see, e.g., Chim, 2021, p. 56 on “karagokoro,” a word Motoori and others used to describe being “China-minded”).

Mark Teeuwen, one of the most prominent scholars of Shintō and Japanese religion and statecraft writing in English today, assesses that there were “four elements of ancient Japanese culture that formed the basis for a series of philosophical reflections and analyses that culminated in the eighteenth century with a movement called Native Studies [i.e., Kokugaku]”: 1) *kami* worship, 2) “the valorization of the ancient Japanese language in the writing and appreciation of *waka* poetry,” 3) the “early mytho-historical chronicles of the Japanese court (*Kojiki*, 712, and *Nihon shoki*, 720),” and 4) “the Japanese imperial lineage” (Teeuwen, 2011, p. 457). Of these four elements, Teeuwen continues, “the starting point of this theorizing [i.e., about ‘a new set of teachings and practices that revolved around ancient court themes, especially *waka*, the *kami*, and the nature of emperorship’] was almost invariably *waka*,” or Japanese poems (Teeuwen, 2011, p. 457).<sup>15</sup>

*Waka* are central because the Kokugaku project was, as mentioned above, very much centered on philology.<sup>16</sup> Teeuwen continues, describing *waka*:

Written in painstakingly purist language that reputedly prohibited the use of any words or linguistic constructions originating

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<sup>15</sup> See also Fessler (1996, pp. 1-15) for a discussion of *kami* views among other Kokugaku scholars during Motoori’s time, and Isomae (1999, pp. 361-385) for more about Kokugaku and the re-evaluation of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*.

<sup>16</sup> See Muraoka (1964, pp. 91-94, 245-264).

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in China, it came to represent the essence of ‘Japan’ in an environment that had been dominated by continental culture. The notion was that in the sounds of the ancient Japanese words lay a spiritual or aesthetic power that merged the ‘mind’ or heart (*kokoro*) of the poet with both the world and audience. This spiritual power came to be called ‘*kotodama*’ and it served later as a key term extolling the near magical value of the supposedly ‘original’ Japanese language.

(Teeuwen, 2011, p. 457).

Teeuwen’s placing of “Japan” in quotes indicates his skepticism of the concept, at least at a time before there was a nationalist conception of such.<sup>17</sup> It is true that Norinaga argued that the Japanese emperor was a *kami* (see, e.g., Kōno, 1940, p. 12). But this should give us much less pause than contemporary researchers would suggest, for the word “*kami*” is complex and need not carry the exclusivist connotations of the monotheistic God. Also, Norinaga is hardly the only Japanese person to have used such language to predicate of the *tennō*—indeed, the *tennō* trace their lineage back to the age of the gods. And it should not call to our minds visions of proto-nationalism, much less proto-fascism. There is at least as much intellectual distance between Lorenzo Valla and the March on Rome, on the one hand, as there is between Motoori Norinaga and the kamikaze pilots, on the other. Scholars today, however, especially in the Anglosphere, sometimes find within Kokugaku, and within the writings of Motoori Norinaga, just such a proto-fascism.<sup>18</sup>

This association of Motoori Norinaga and Kokugaku with proto-fascism, but of Valla with Humanism (the rhetorical valence of “Humanism” remains extremely positive in the West, and Valla is almost universally heralded as a forerunner of the secular humanities), is odd. This is because, in many ways, Norinaga’s project was very similar to Valla’s. For example, Norinaga advocated a *ressourcement*, a return to the origins of his culture in antiquity—an antiquity from which that cul-

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<sup>17</sup> But see, on Teeuwen’s call for nuancing between Kokugaku and “nativism,” Flueckiger (2008, p. 212).

<sup>18</sup> On the links between putative fascist Rōyama Masamichi (1895-1980) and Kokugaku, for example, see Fletcher (1979, p. 55).

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ture was thought, by Norinaga and others, to have developed and later strayed. Norinaga, like his “posthumous disciple” (*botsugo no monjin*) Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843), emphasized the Japaneseness of the cherry blossoms, for example, seeing them as the very heart and soul of Japan (*yamatogokoro*) (Koyasu 1992, p. 2; Yamashita, 2012, p. 4; Hirata, 1998). Valla did not compose paeans to cherry blossoms, of course. But Valla did seek the revival of the spirit, the heart and soul, of classical Rome. Norinaga’s Rome, on this reading, was ancient Japan. Antiquity was the lifeblood of the present for both men. As Ishikawa Jun writes of Norinaga:

Verse [to Norinaga] was inseparable from the study of antiquity. Verse was not just for devoting oneself to the pursuit of refinement in everyday things. It was also about growing in understanding of the ancients, about learning of the tastes of their world. Verse was a way of entering on the path [of this growth in understanding]. Verse was always lending itself to such things. [Therefore,] one must not stop with appreciating old verse, one must also try to make verses of one’s own.

(Ishikawa, 1970, p. 8)<sup>19</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, this passage could be written of Valla almost as neatly as it could of its original subject, Motoori Norinaga.

But while the Kokugaku thinkers were fixed on the distant past, it is the present, and the much more recent past, that has tended much more forcefully to define them. “Thinkers” in the plural, because Norinaga is not alone in setting the tone of Kokugaku discourse. For instance, much of the reputation accruing to Norinaga filters through his disciple Atsutane. And this reputation in turn is filtered through Japan’s twentieth century, in particular the cataclysm of World War II. Koyasu Nobukuni writes of Atsutane:

In the prewar, Atsutane enjoyed a reputation as lofty as Norinaga’s, as can be seen in the fact that Atsutane’s disciples took

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19 This and all other translations from Japanese in this paper by the author.

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part in the imperial rule restoration movement during the Meiji Restoration, as well as in crafting “unity of rites and government” (*saisei itchi*) policies during the very earliest days of the Meiji period. In the postwar, however, Atsutane was denounced, branded a “fanatical ultranationalist” (*kyōgenteki kokusuishugisha*). From prewar to postwar, Atsutane was thus subjected to extremes of both praise and censure. In order to rethink [lit., “reread”] Atsutane, a period of what must be called hesitation (*tamerai*) was required. It was also necessary to build a new viewpoint from which to rethink him.

(Koyasu, 1992, p. 2)<sup>20</sup>

Valla looked to the prose masters and rhetoricians of ancient Rome, while Norinaga was attracted to verse that was impressionistic and redolent of the spirit of the past. Both men shared a desire to reform their present by returning to a golden age sunk deep under the waves of time. For Norinaga, this golden age was much nearer to hand, and that because of differences in methodology. Unlike Valla, who was almost exclusively philological, Norinaga could also turn to aesthetics, such as the lilting dance of the falling cherry blossom petals, to call back to life the days of old. Norinaga read old texts, as did Valla. But Norinaga also found the past recaptured in the nature of Japan he saw all around him.

And yet, even in his aesthetics Norinaga turned most often to words, as attested by his famous theory of *mono-no-aware*. In trying to make ancient language live in the present again, Norinaga was not, at a basic level, very different from Valla. Ishikawa Jun writes:

Norinaga came up with [...] *mono-no-aware* [...] because his mind was with the old verses and the ancient writings. *Mono-no-aware* is a way of thinking that is to be expressed in the subtle relationships among words. As Norinaga writes, ‘In verse, we do not know *mono-no-aware* so much as *mono-no-aware* comes

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20 By “‘unity of rites and government’ (*saisei itchi*) policies during the very earliest days of the Meiji period,” Koyasu may be referring to Ōkuni Takamasa (1792-1871). See Teeuwen (2011, pp. 463-464). See also Hata (2013, pp. 1-60); Ogawa (2021, pp. 24-25); Aizawa (2021a, pp. 42-46); Aizawa (2021b, pp. 32-36); Brownstein (1987, pp. 436-438).

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forth [from verse].’ Further, ‘In the *Kokin Wakashū*<sup>21</sup>, *yamatouta* [i.e., *waka*] take the human heart as a seed, out of which comes a myriad of words. What I call here the heart is, more precisely, the heart which knows *mono-no-aware*.’

(Ishikawa (1970, p. 14),<sup>22</sup>

Valla did not quite immanentize the ancient as much, or as literally, as Norinaga did, but the two men’s dispositional approaches to the past were strikingly similar.

### 3 Modern Political Divides

For all of these similarities between Valla’s and Norinaga’s lives and lifeworks, there has grown a sharp differentiation between them, especially in modern scholarship. Not between the two men in particular, as there are, to my knowledge, no narrow comparative studies of them, and certainly Norinaga had never heard of Valla. But there is a contemporary differentiation between their milieux, Northern Italian Humanism on the one side, and the dark implications of proto-fascism and proto-nationalism on the other, with Japan’s mid-twentieth century history read back into the Tokugawa period in a determinative way, a way which scholars of Western Europe tend to eschew as ahistorical (as indeed it is).

This is not to say that there is no political valence to either men’s ideas. The political implications of Valla’s ideas, for example, abounded in potential. Part of the Humanist project was the re-founding of the political, the reordering of ancient Greek *polis* ideas and Scholastic visions of common humanity into a more deft and agile arrangement capable of keeping pace with the pressures of the age (Boyle, 2004, pp. S225-S226). To put it more directly, many Humanists wanted to make their way in the world of fallen men, and not live among the abstractions of the Schoolmen. This involved making peace with, or excuses for,

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21 Norinaga is probably referring here to the *kanajo*, a supplement to the *Kokin Wakashū* written in kana.

22 See also Ōno (2016, p. 26); Enomoto (2014, pp. 17-21).

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fallen human nature. In other words, this involved politics. And Valla was certainly no stranger to the political world.

For instance, as Sarah Stever Gravelle points out, Valla was concerned with understanding why Latin, and then Italian, served “as a universal language,” and why the Greeks “fail[ed] to unite linguistically or politically” (Gravelle, 1989, p. 335). Valla’s “radical de-ontologization of language,” as leading Valla scholar Salvatore Camporeale put it, sought to overturn the Constantine “superstructure” of the Church over the Bible (to borrow the phrasing of Melissa Meriam Bullard), which precipitated big changes in the political life of Europe and far beyond (Bullard, 2005, pp. 479-480, citing Camporeale, 1972, p. 6). One could even go farther than these specifics, positioning Valla on the cusp of the revolution from the religiously-bounded thought of the Scholastics, or even of Petrarch (1304-1374)—itself a development from the morally-informed political thinking of Seneca (ca. 4 BC-65 AD) and Cicero (106 BC-43BC)—to the amoral power politics of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and the areligious, even anti-religious thinkers who followed him.<sup>23</sup>

This is the context of Valla’s Humanism. Valla wanted to work backward, to recover a lost and pure Christian religion and Latin language.<sup>24</sup> But he also wanted to recover a theory of pleasure in marked contradiction to what he saw as the Scholastics’ over-emphasis on otherworldly asceticism (Diaconu, 2021, p. 140; see also Kircher, 2013, pp. 1-19). In doing this he was ineluctably lurching forward, into a linguistically-pure future which entailed the hardening of borders and other early workings of the nation-state (Ledo (2019, pp. 395-396); see also Bauer (2013, pp. 146-148); Renner (2020, p. 601); Monreal Pérez (2017, pp. 195-212); Blum (2002, p. 121)).<sup>25</sup> To leave abstractions (and the unquestioned authority of the supranational “superstructure” of the

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23 See, e.g., Trinkaus, 1987, pp. 12-14, and Jurdjevic, 1999, pp. 994-1020, esp. pp. 1000-1002 for a discussion of various Italian Humanist views of ancient Rome in light of the contemporary relationship between Florence and Milan.

24 This was of course a very common desire, especially during and after the Renaissance in northern Italy. See, e.g., Yost, 1969, pp. 5-13. Judith Butler would counter that there is no lost “authentic” to rediscover. See Larer, 2014, p. 509, citing and paraphrasing Butler, 1990, pp. 175, 41.

25 On the tensions inherent in the philological and historiographical—and religious—project which Valla and other Renaissance humanists initiated, see, e.g., Hunter, 2014, pp. 335-337.

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Catholic Church) was to enter the world of men in cities and republics as one found them. Without churchly abstractions, those who came after the Humanists turned, often, to the state as a new organizing principle. In an age of upheaval and, as Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) was to embody, contradiction, the Humanists were searching for a lost past while backing unwittingly into a hardening political future (McDermott, 1998, pp. 254-273). Valla's works, for example, were "embraced," as David Marsh writes, by Martin Luther, portending the sharpening of confessional and, later, national borderlines which lay ahead for post-Humanist Europe (Marsh, 2003, p. 486; see also Bullard, 2005, pp. 477-478). Valla is almost never connected directly to twentieth-century politics today, but this is not because he was not, in his own time, political. It is also not because such lines could not be drawn should one wish.

As for Norinaga, his time was one of perhaps equal ferment to that of the Northern Italian early Renaissance in which Valla lived. The Tokugawa order was much less malleable than the Italian patchwork of republics and city-states, and so the political repercussions of Norinaga's thought, and of Kokugaku more generally, may have been delayed. But not forever. For example, Koyasu differentiates between the contemporary legacies of Hirata Atsutane and Motoori Norinaga, but also emphasizes that both legacies are bound up with Japanese modernity and in particular the ways in which the Japanese past is interpreted in the postwar (Koyasu, 1992, pp. 2-3). Kokugaku's name contains the kanji for "country" or "realm" (*koku*). So, if Kokugaku isn't political (even though it isn't national), then what else could it be? If Valla must be interpreted politically, in other words, then surely Norinaga must be as well.

And yet, things are not quite so simple. There is something else which nudges, or wedges, the reputations of Valla and Norinaga apart over time. To be sure, Motoori Norinaga and many other Kokugaku devotees did delineate a religious faith in the origins and particularity, even superiority, of the land of their birth, the archipelago of Japan (Motoori, 1934a, p. 13; Motoori, 1934b, pp. 21-32).<sup>26</sup> But there would seem to be

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<sup>26</sup> See also Motoori (1987, pp. 456-493) for an annotated translation of this work, and Brownlee

something more at work in modern scholars' critiques of Norinaga. Perhaps it is that, unlike Valla and his vaunted hardheaded rationalism, his refusal to accept the texts of the past at face value, Norinaga and some of his fellow Kokugaku devotees were more comfortable with what we might call a Derridean view of literature. "Emotionalism" is a not an uncommon critique of Norinaga, for example (Noguchi, 2010, pp. 28-30). One recalls here Carol Gluck's assessment of "the *minshūshi* [i.e., people's history] scholars" as being "in general" more "concerned [...] with sentiment than institutions. [...] They are engaged [...] with matters of intellectual history, which they sometimes refer to as *seishinshi* (history of the 'spirit')" (Gluck, 1978, p. 38). Some of Gluck's targets are twentieth-century historian Irokawa Daikichi (1925-2021) and Kano Masanao, but Gluck makes the Kokugaku connection explicit (Gluck, 1978, pp. 44-45). On these readings, Kokugaku seems to evince a kind of Romanticism, the kind that, in the European context, some have claimed led to the twisted poetics of the mid-twentieth-century European dictators. Along these same lines, perhaps, and following Marxist intellectual Walter Benjamin in finding that "fascism aestheticizes politics," Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney saw in cherry blossom petals, which Norinaga so loved, the stirrings of twentieth-century fascism (Shillony, 2003, pp. 264-266). On such readings, Norinaga, who loved Japan at an aesthetic level, is tinted thereby with the darkness of the mid twentieth century in East Asia.

But why not indict Valla on the same charges? If anything, Valla's project of philological and linguistic rediscovery was held much more dearly by some twentieth-century revolutionaries than was Norinaga's. Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci "examined the Renaissance *questione della lingua* as a problem in the politics of culture," writes John Leeds (2004, p. 116). "Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*," Leeds continues:

contain an extensive series of essays on the political functions of Italian intellectual elites. One of the chief practical concerns

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(1988, pp. 35-44) for an introduction to Tamakushige. See also Flueckiger (2008, pp. 211-263), and, Norinaga's *Naobi no mitama* (1711).

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motivating these essays was the extent to which formal training in standard (that is, Florentine) Italian might be a necessary element for popular political struggle. [...] Gramsci [...] formulates the choice between humanist neo-Latin and the vernaculars as an option for either reactionary or progressive political forces (Leeds, 2004, pp. 116-117).

Gramsci wrote in his *Prison Notebooks* that:

Every language is an integral conception of the world and not simply a piece of clothing that can fit indifferently as form over any content. Well then? Does this not mean that two conceptions of the world were in conflict: a bourgeois-popular expressing itself in the vernacular and an aristocratic-feudal one expressing itself in Latin and harking back to Roman antiquity? And is not the Renaissance characterized by this conflict rather than by the serene creation of a triumphant culture?

(Leeds, 2004, p. 117, quoting Gramsci, 1985, p. 226)

Valla was a gifted Latinist, of the classical and not “neo-Latin” variety. So perhaps on this scheme, Gramsci would have seen Valla as reactionary and not as bourgeoisie. But somehow I think it might have been the opposite, given Valla’s standing as a Humanist and his debates (very vernacular ones!) against the Scholastics of his day.

Gramsci’s ideas raise uncomfortable questions for our comparison of Valla and Norinaga. If Valla could look back to Rome with the desire to revive that classical milieu—something which Gramsci’s contemporary, Benito Mussolini (the very leader whose alleged assassination attempt had led to Gramsci’s imprisonment) made his own political project—then why could Norinaga not do something similar vis-à-vis ancient Japan? If another medieval European, Marsilius of Padua’s (ca. 1270-1342), thoughts about language are admitted to be similar to Norinaga’s, which I believe they are, then how is Marsilius of Padua not a proto-fascist, while Norinaga, in some circles, is? Norinaga even waded into a debate about Ise Shrine, a debate about documents and legitima-

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cy very similar to the debate about the Donation of Constantine which Valla took on (Tucker, 1996, pp. 123-124). But somehow association with Ise, the spiritual homeland of the Japanese imperial lineage, taboos Norinaga, while clarifying the fight over the Donation of Constantine has done little but enhance the reputation of Valla.

Not everyone conflates Japan's premodern past with its modern history, to be sure. For example, in a review of the Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney book mentioned in a previous paragraph in this section, esteemed scholar of Japanese history Ben-Ami Shillony points out that the distinction which Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney wants to make in the case of Japan, "between patriotism, [...] which is considered to be natural and noble, and nationalism, [...] which is condemned as evil," is "ahistorical" (Shillony, 2003, p. 266). "The fact that prewar Japanese liberals espoused nationalism should not surprise [Ohnuki-Tierney]," Shillony writes, "and need not be explained by the existence of 'feudalistic remnants', as Japanese historians tend to do" (Shillony, 2003, p. 266). This is an important historical intervention by a careful scholar, and one to be taken seriously. By extension, it will not do to link Norinaga to what came several centuries after his time. By contrast, another careful scholar, Richard H. Minear, wrote approvingly of the comparison between Erasmus and Ogyū Sorai. The "European Christian Humanist [i.e., Erasmus] and Japanese Confucian moralist [i.e., Sorai] faced similar situations and resolved them in similar ways," Minear writes. "If the European Christian Humanist enjoys a worldwide reputation," he continues, "then perhaps the Japanese Confucian moralist is also worthy of our serious attention" (Minear, 1976, p. 49). I agree here as well. It is important to note that even Maruyama Masao saw similarities between Sorai and European pre-modernism along the Reformational track (Shogimen 2002, pp. 499-501, citing Maruyama, 1974, chs. 1 and 2; see also Ikeda, 2018, p. 26). While one must not overstep historiographical bounds, one should seek analogies and make comparisons across cultural borders. Norinaga and Valla are, on my view, very much analogous in terms of what I see as their humanistic commitments.

However, where culture boundaries have been crossed, one wonders

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why some would insist on drawing hard lines again. While the findings of Maruyama vis-à-vis Sorai are described by one of the leading scholars of Tokugawa Japan in the United States, Harry Harootunian, as a “liberating view,” it is not clear why further association with Norinaga and “Japanism” should dent the analysis (Harootunian, 1977, p. 521). “Unearthing Japan’s indigenous roots of modernity in the field of political thought was Maruyama’s attempt at rescuing modern values against attacks by ultranationalists who called for overcoming the disease of modernity through Japanism,” Harootunian asserts (1977, p. 522).<sup>27</sup> But it is never explained, by Harootunian or others who write in a similar vein, why Japan must be “rescu[ed]” from its association with the likes of Motoori Norinaga. I know of no similar project to disentangle Italy from Valla, for instance, not even in light of Antonio Gramsci’s praise.

It is similarly difficult to square the verdict of Japanese culture as one of “national narcissism” with the pass apparently given to similar dispensations in the West (DeVos, cited in Bellah, 1965, p. 573). Robert N. Bellah (1927-2013), renowned scholar of Japanese religion, praises Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) and Uchimura Kanzō (1861-1930) as “Japanese nationalists,” but only on the condition that they were not “Japanese particularist[s],” a distinction which seems to be made much more frequently when speaking of Japan—especially from a postwar perspective—than when speaking of other places (Bellah, 1965, pp. 574-575). I have not seen such scrupulous pains taken to separate out Italian intellectual and political history from the fascist years—the “particularist” years—of the Mussolini era. ‘Dante may have been a Florentine, but he wasn’t particular about it...’ On this score, Bellah’s praise, in several places, of postwar anti-government campaigner and revisionist scholar Ienaga Saburō (1913-2002) may perhaps be allowed, for better or for worse, to speak for itself (Bellah, 1965, p. 577).

To come at it from another angle, Valla wrote before the “Cartesian split” between the subject and the world, and Norinaga almost certainly never knew of it either, despite post-dating Rene Descartes (Celenza, 2005, p. 484). Perhaps that also helps explain the different reputations of

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<sup>27</sup> See also Flueckiger (2011, pp. 25-26).

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Norinaga and against Valla, for it is our ways of thinking, and not theirs, that shape those reputations today. Western scholars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whether they knew or know it or not, appear to have been operating along the same lines that Valla began to draw in the fifteenth century (Larer, 2014, pp. 502-504). Western political and intellectual history can be finely combed through, distinctions made ad infinitum. Asian political and intellectual history, however, is stickier, at least in the hands of some in the modern, Western-dominated world. Humanism in Italy and a quite similar undertaking in Japan amount, on the reading of Valla and Norinaga today, to very different things.

### **4 Conclusion**

Lorenzo Valla and Motoori Norinaga were embarked on very similar trajectories of intellectual and political inquiry. So, why are they and their surrounding cultural and historical milieux treated differently in the West today? I have not found a way to escape the conclusion that the cause lies in virtually unnoticed assumptions among some Westerners (and even among some scholars in Japan, such as the very Western-influenced Maruyama Masao) of Western cultural superiority. How else to explain that two people embarked on very similar intellectual endeavors in very similar intellectual worlds could so differ in reputation? The very different historiographical reputations of Valla and Norinaga within the academy reveal, it would seem, some buried stereotypes. Valla was a Humanist because he questioned Scholastics and sought to revive the glories of Rome, two tropes which are intimately familiar to Westerners. Norinaga was, by contrast, a “proto-fascist” because he sought to rediscover a Japan, of some kind, beneath the many archaeological layers of “China” under which she lay.

It is hoped that in the future there will be many more comparative essays of this kind between thinkers of the Japanese and Western canons, especially on the subject of comparative Humanism, however defined. Richard Minear was on to something. Not only do comparative intellectual history and historiography reveal truths about the worlds of the

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past, but they also speak to us about the world we live in today, wherein historical awareness has polarized into, for example, “fascism” and “Humanism,” despite very little apparent difference between them.

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