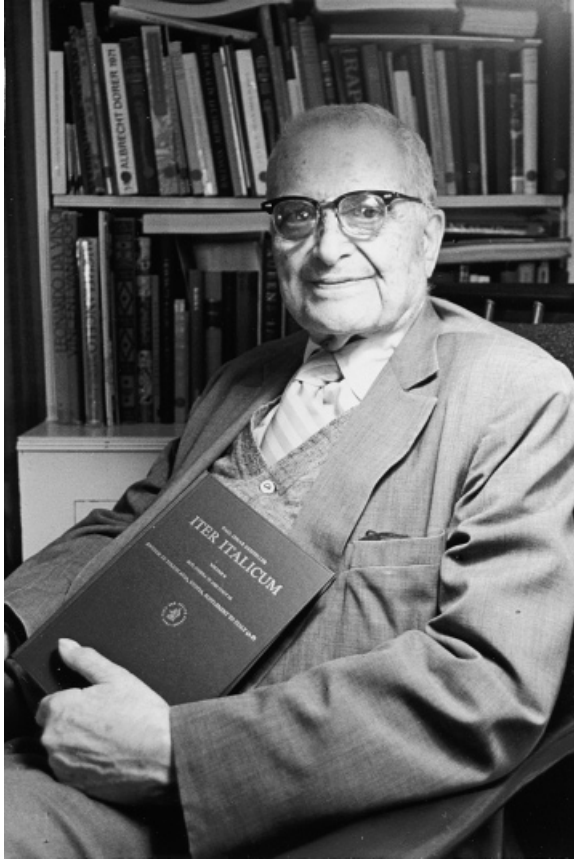

PAUL OSKAR KRISTELLER



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THE DEATH of Paul Oskar Kristeller in New York on 7 June 1999, a member of the American Philosophical Society since 1974, brought to a close one of the most remarkable scholarly careers of the twentieth century. He may prove to have been, after Jakob Burckhardt, the most important student of the Renaissance in modern times.

Born into an affluent Jewish family in Berlin in 1905, during his university years he not only trained in classical philology under some of the giants of the age, including Werner Jaeger, Eduard Norden, Paul Maas, Ulrich von Wilamowitz, Friedrich Solmsen, and Eduard Meyer, but, impelled by an interest in philosophy, he also attended the lectures of Ernst Cassirer on Kant, heard the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, and studied with the existentialists Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. He gave what he called “an existentialist interpretation” to the classical Neoplatonist Plotinus in his 1929 dissertation under Ernst Hoffmann at Heidelberg. In 1931, sponsored by Heidegger, he began to work on the most important Platonist of the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino.

Kristeller was also a superb pianist. Professors such as Eduard Norden and Martin Heidegger regularly had him over to their houses to play. For a time, he and fellow university students Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith played as a trio. The illustrious expatriate historian Felix Gilbert remembered Kristeller at Heidelberg as a dreamy, poetical type who liked to stroll along the Neckar River. Kristeller, in fact, did write poetry, examples of which can be found at the start of the first two volumes of his *Iter Italicum*.

The Nazi victory in 1933 ended Kristeller’s career in Germany. But he found support in Italy, especially from the philosopher and former minister of education Giovanni Gentile, who secured for him a position as lecturer in German at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, the most elite university in Italy. It was at the Scuola Normale that Kristeller completed his first great works in the Renaissance: the *Supplementum Ficinianum* (1937) and *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (1943). The former remains to this day fundamental for the texts and information it contains and for Kristeller’s masterful discussion (in Latin, of course) of the origins and history of Ficino’s many writings. The latter had been written in German by 1938, but could not be published until it was translated into English five years later because Mussolini’s racial laws of August 1938 terminated Kristeller’s Italian career and drove him to seek still a third homeland. Up to that point, Kristeller had begun to think himself Italian. Gentile even strove to acquire Italian citizenship for him.

Before Kristeller left Italy, Gentile personally intervened with Mussolini to indemnify him for the loss of his career. Kristeller relates in a

memoir (*Renaissance Quarterly* 47 [1994], 924) how he scorned this attempt to have him “sell his indignation.” Various attempts were made to find him a position outside of Italy. A fellowship at Oxford was in the offing, but before that materialized Kristeller accepted a position in the United States.

With the help of Gentile and others, especially the Yale University historian Roland Bainton, he sailed from Genoa in February 1939, and by March was teaching a graduate seminar at Yale on Plotinus. In the fall of 1939 Kristeller signed a one-year contract to teach philosophy at Columbia University. Thus began a relationship with Columbia that ended only with his death sixty years later as Frederick J. E. Woodbridge Professor of Philosophy Emeritus. The next year, when he married fellow German refugee Edith Lind Lewinnek, M.D., Kristeller acquired the second constant element of his life in America. He lost Edith to cancer on 26 January 1992.

During the war years Kristeller developed his most far-reaching theories concerning the Renaissance, theories he first published in an article in the 1944–45 issue of *Byzantion*, entitled “Renaissance Humanism and Scholasticism.” In essence, Kristeller argued that Renaissance humanism was not a philosophy but a phase in the Western rhetorical tradition stretching back to classical antiquity and emerging in the more immediate past out of specifically Italian medieval rhetorical traditions. The strength of Kristeller’s interpretation is that he sited humanism not only culturally but also economically and socially within the Italian context. At Columbia, partially under the influence of colleagues, especially John Herman Randall, he came to have a deep appreciation of Renaissance Aristotelianism. Hence, he stressed that far from being a dying medieval residue, Scholasticism in Renaissance Italy was a buoyant, growing cultural force and produced some of the most daring thinkers of the age. He had the chance to elaborate on his ideas in the Martin Classical Lectures at Oberlin College in February 1954. After these lectures were published in 1955 as *The Classics and Renaissance Thought* and then again, combined with other essays, in 1961’s *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*, Kristeller reached a very wide educated audience and began to speak with almost oracular authority.

This authority stemmed in no small part from the first volumes of Kristeller’s *Studies in the Renaissance* (1956) and *Iter Italicum* (1963). The first volume of *Studies* may be the single most important collection of articles on the Renaissance by one scholar ever published. It brought together not only disparate studies of Kristeller on Marsilio Ficino and Renaissance Platonism, but also fundamental articles on humanism,

scholasticism, the Italian language, and music. There were eventually four volumes of *Studies*, the last appearing in 1996.

Iter Italicum was born in 1945 when Kristeller showed Fritz Saxl of London's Warburg Institute the notebooks of manuscript information he had compiled during his Italian years. Saxl agreed that this material should be published and that the Warburg would sponsor the project. They decided to call the work *Iter Italicum*. The subtitle gives a fair description of its content: *A Finding List of Uncatalogued or Incompletely Catalogued Humanistic Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and Other Libraries*. But neither of them grasped then the full immensity of the project. The notebooks were only the start. It would take many more research trips to flesh them out. The first volume did not appear until nearly twenty years after, and it would take five more volumes, each with its text in double columns and smallish print, the last appearing in 1992 and its index in 1996, before the work was done. These volumes marked Kristeller as one of the greats of historical scholarship. *Iter Italicum*, produced by Kristeller virtually single-handedly, is comparable in scope and detail to the *corpora* of inscriptions and texts compiled by teams of scholars in previous centuries.

With *Iter Italicum*, Kristeller did more than expose a vast fund of primary data. He also helped to change the culture of manuscript research. From the very start, in the 1930s, he sought out manuscripts in order to share his findings with the young *normalisti* at Pisa. After coming to America, he happily passed on his manuscript data to others. Decades before any particular volume of the *Iter* appeared, many of the manuscripts it listed had already become public knowledge as Kristeller constantly answered queries of fellow scholars and allowed scholars to consult his typescript in his home or at the Warburg.

Encouragement of the scholarship of others, in fact, constituted one of the leitmotifs of Kristeller's life. Some of the greatest Italian Renaissance scholars of the last forty years were the *normalisti* who had come under Kristeller's spell during his time in Italy. Coming to America, he was one of the founders of the Renaissance Society of America, the president of the Medieval Academy of America, and the chief inspirer of *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum*, the ongoing project that aims to chart the fortune of all extant classical works through the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Kristeller's bibliography is larger than the telephone directory of many small towns (nearly 550 items, with some individual items, such as *Iter Italicum* and *Studies* being massive, multi-volume works). But publications were only one of the ways he exercised influence. He had many students at Columbia and even more outside of Columbia. He carried on a vast correspondence, the full extent of which will only

become apparent when his papers are studied at Columbia's Rare Book Room. He would end his Columbia seminar on research techniques with the stern admonition, "Henceforth I shall help you in direct proportion as you will help scholarship." In fact, that was not true. Although engulfed in honors (the Serena Medal of the British Academy in 1958, the Premio Internazionale Galileo Galilei in 1968, appointment as Commendatore nell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana in 1971 and fellow of prestigious academies of arts and sciences in Europe and America, and bestowal of many honorary degrees), he could never resist helping any student or a scholar who sought him out. For good reason seven different homage volumes have been dedicated to him, each spontaneously organized by separate groups of scholars in Europe and America.

Elected 1974

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[This is a variant version of an obituary that has appeared or will appear in *The Independent, Renaissance News & Notes*, and the *Newsletter* of the American Cusanus Society.]

