

E. H. Gombrich, *The Renaissance: Period or Movement* in JB Trapp (ed), *Background to the English Renaissance: Introductory Lectures, 1974*, pp.9-30 [Trapp no.1974D.1]

It is quite a tall order to talk about the Renaissance as such, or to introduce a course on the Renaissance by discussing the concept, or the idea of the Renaissance, or revival, or rebirth, or whatever equivalent you may choose for this loaded term. The first thing to ask is really whether we should look at the Renaissance — as is conventionally done — as a particular period in Western history, or whether there may be an alternative to this conventional view, one which simply looks at our periodization of history in a way (as it will soon turn out) connected with the term "Renaissance." Connected, and I may anticipate here, because if the term Renaissance, or rebirth or revival, is understood to mean the revival of classical antiquity, or classical values, or ancient civilization, then the period between antiquity and the revival will be the middle period, the "medium aevum", the Middle-Ages, and this, of course, is what the period between these two ages has been called. The term "Middle Ages" was therefore an invention of the Renaissance, because in the Renaissance, whatever it may be, the people who proclaimed the importance of rebirth, postulated that something had been dead, and had to be re-born, and the period that had been responsible for this death was the Middle Ages. We cannot understand the way in which Western history was viewed without seeing very clearly that the term "Renaissance" was charged with a particular system of values. But what these values are is a matter we have to interpret because, in some respects, the interpretation of what the Renaissance stood for, or stands for, even now, has shifted, and shifted often, almost kaleidoscopically, particularly during the last one hundred years. It is important, after all this debate, to go back and ask what the Renaissance thought of the Renaissance. This problem of what the Renaissance thought of itself is the topic of the first chapter of Erwin Panofsky's *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, [1] which is significantly called "Renaissance, self-description or self-deception?" In other words, it raises the question whether those who proclaimed the rebirth were in fact deceiving themselves, or whether there was something in it.

The question is typical of the unease, the *malaise*, with which the claims of the Renaissance have been met in the last few decades, although it seems to me that more recently again other problems have moved into the centre of interest.

Renaissance as Recovery

It is generally agreed that the man who was mainly responsible for the proclamation of the rebirth, or the need for a rebirth, was Francesco Petrarca. His dates are 1304-1374. He was, as you know, an Italian who lived a good deal of his life in France. He had to live in Avignon because of the Babylonian captivity of the Roman Church, and surely the feeling of dissatisfaction, the longing for a renewal of Italy, had a good deal to do, among many other things, with this blow to the pride of Rome — that the Roman Church was no longer centered on Rome. For Petrarch (as we call him) considered history, all history, a praise of Rome. An heir to the great Imperial tradition, the heir to the praise of the conquerors of the world, he had to see the seat of power transferred to France, and this was certainly one of the motives in his life which made him long for a return in every sense of the term. But, most of all, Petrarch was a poet. He was a poet with a wonderful ear for language — for the beauty of language, beautiful Latin as well as beautiful Italian — and for articulateness. He disliked and despised the crabbed technical terminology used at the Universities. He longed for a revival not only of the power and glory of Rome, but of the beautiful language of Vergil, of Horace and of Cicero. He, himself, began a poem, in 1338, in Latin hexameters, on Scipio Africanus, called *Africa*, and it is in the preliminary lines of this epic that he addresses his poem and uses the terms to which I shall have to refer:

"But if you [meaning the poem] , as is the hope and desire of my mind, will long live after me, better ages are in store. The sleep of forgetfulness will not continue in all the years to come. Once the darkness has been broken, our descendants will perhaps be able to return to the pure, pristine radiance." [2]

This "return to the pure, pristine radiance", for which Petrarch longed, could be interpreted in religious as well as in secular terms. The world had become corrupted, soiled by bad tradition, and the need was to recover what had been lost in the *tenebrae*, in the darkness, in the *medium aevum*, the Middle Ages.

There were solid reasons for Petrarch's complaint and longing. He knew perfectly well that many of the classical authors he much admired were not easily, if at all, accessible in manuscript. His friends hunted them out and he himself discovered new letters by Cicero and new Decades of Livy. He started the fashion for the recovery of ancient authors whose works had been lost or mislaid in the monastic libraries. Together with the study of the beautiful style of these ancient authors he so much admired, there was an awareness that certain of their values and much of their knowledge had also been lost. Not least, of course, the knowledge of Greek. The ancient authors constantly refer to Homer, to Plato and to other authors. Petrarch, who tried to learn Greek and made contact with Byzantine scholars, never managed to learn it, but he was very much aware of the need to recover something which was demonstrably lost in the West — that is to say the ability to read Greek. I do not want to give the impression that no one in the Latin West ever read Greek in what we now still call the Middle Ages, but there were very few opportunities to learn it.

Now this new emphasis on the beautiful style of the ancients, on the knowledge that had been lost and that had to be recovered, was from the beginning linked with the idea of "ages." The idea that there are various "ages," periods, in history can be traced back to a mythical idea — the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Iron Age and so forth — and the hope for the return of the Golden Age which was enshrined in one of the most famous of ancient poems, the Fourth *Eclogue* by Virgil, who had prophesied that the reign of Saturn would return again — "*redeunt Saturnia regna*" — and who had hoped that with this return of a golden age civilization would be reborn. Now here you had a new faith in something coming, something that would cleanse away the adulteration of the past and begin afresh, and the main target of criticism here — and this is interesting in connection with our present-day situation — was the educational system and the universities. What on earth had they been doing, and what were they doing if they allowed these great treasures of antiquity to be so badly neglected?

I shall concentrate for a moment on the relation between the university situation and this idea that something had to be recovered, that the old corrupt routine had to be swept aside, because those who were particularly intent on a good style, learning proper Latin and Greek, felt that there was not really a very good niche for them in the university system. The medieval system of learning, as you may know, was divided into the so-called "liberal" arts. There were seven of them. Three were preliminary; they were Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric. They had to do with words because before you learnt anything you had to learn to express yourself, to be articulate. And that is why you learnt Grammar, Latin grammar of course; Dialectic, logical argument; and Rhetoric, speech. This was the Trivium — the three ways — and our term "trivial" is still an echo of the fact that these were the elementary subjects. You may say "this is what one learns at primary school, this is trivial." The Quadrivium was the next phase, the higher disciplines, based on real knowledge as distinct from mere words, and this was the knowledge of numbers — Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music. When we speak today of the Arts subjects and of the Science subjects, and of the alleged conflict

between the two, we still echo, in a way, this great division between those who are interested in elegant forms of expression and those who are interested in knowledge rather than opinion. That is how the mathematical sciences were seen at that time. It has been said, and well said, that in the universities the Renaissance was a rebellion of the Trivium against the Quadrivium; a rebellion of those concerned with language, who did not want to take the second role any more because the Faculties of the universities were divided according to quite different principles. According to the career somebody wanted to take up, there was Law, there was Medicine, there was Theology, and each of these was enshrined in very technical language and technical textbooks. Those who wished to teach Rhetoric and the others were asking, "Where do we come in?" It was these people who became known as the "*umanisti*" — we speak of the "humanists." They were men who emphasised the importance of language. In real life many of them were diplomats, secretaries, scholars, people in whose careers the facility in writing a good letter or making an impressive speech was very important. Very often they were not theologians, but laymen. And yet it is totally misleading to think of "humanism" as a movement which reacted against the Roman Church. The term "humanism," as distinct from "*umanista*," is a nineteenth-century invention and we shall see that the nineteenth-century tended altogether to exaggerate the opposition between the Renaissance and the so-called Christian centuries.

What the humanists also claimed was that the past had had a very bad tradition of learning and so they concentrated first of all on cultivating the ancient authors and their own style. There is a dialogue by Leonardo Bruni from the early fifteenth century, where one of these humanists, a merchant and amateur called Niccolò Niccoli is asked by a friend why he does not conduct any of those disputations which had been dear to the Middle Ages. He rejoins:

If only we had the books that contained the wisdom. If only our ancestors had not been so ignorant. Even the few books that do exist are so corrupted in their texts that they cannot teach us anything. What a time we live in, where people promise to teach what they evidently don't know themselves! When they open their mouths they utter more solecisms than words. If you ask them what their authority is they'll invoke Aristotle, but the books they refer to are so harsh, inept and dissonant in style that one cannot listen to them, and this cannot be the true Aristotle. He would not recognise himself in such a guise.[3]

So here you have the attitude of the young generation towards the traditional university teachers. In 1397, at the turn of the century, we hear a complaint about this *brigata*, the young men who considered themselves superior.

In order to appear erudite to the man in the street, they cry out in the public square, arguing about how many diphthongs exist in the language of the ancients, and why today the anapaest with four short metrical feet is no longer used. And with such fantastic speculations they waste all their time.[4]

But the claim that they wasted their time was soon no longer tenable. At least the students of these men gradually acknowledged that something had been rediscovered. Bruni himself was praised for having found again "the ancient ease of style." [5] It is this ease of style that these men treasured and really did recover. Very few people, too few, I believe, nowadays spend their time reading humanist Latin. But those who do will know that in fact there is a fine flow of language. Sometimes it becomes more elegant than substantial but the need, or the feeling that something has to be recovered there, travels from Italy to the North across the Alps, and this is what I want to show you here since you are particularly interested in how the Renaissance hit England.

It first came across the Alps as a movement in the Universities for the reform of teaching. In 1492, the German humanist Conrad Celtis wrote a letter to Ingolstadt University which is worth quoting in this context. He writes how grieved he is when he hears those who expound the law from the university chair lacking all sweetness and art, offending the ear rather like cackling geese or lowing cattle, using abject vulgar and corrupt words, whatever comes into their mouths, barbarously and harshly mistreating the sweet Roman tongue. He greatly wondered how it was possible

that in all these centuries, in all the many schools of Germany, with their scholastic clamour, all of which pretend to learning, nobody had been found who could write letters or speeches, poems or histories in a civilized and polished way — as it is the custom in Italy, where there are fewer but much more learned universities. Thus [he continues] I was sorry for my Germany because in all its schools I have seen no one to expound Cicero.[6]

Out of love for "the republic of learning" he offered to remedy these ills by becoming a professor himself. Here you find a much more obvious clash in the North between the traditions of the Middle Ages and the university courses and those who had learnt their new ideas in Italy after the movement started by Petrarch gathered momentum. In 1515, these brash young men, who called themselves "poetae" — the poets — as distinct from the learned men, launched a wonderful hoax. They published a book called *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*, the Letters of obscure Men. These letters pretend, or purport, to be letters by conservative university teachers who complain to each other about the dreadful movement that has deprived them of their prestige. I can only read to you the translation of one of these letters, or an extract from it, to give you the flavour of the satire which must have had a good deal of truth and probably echoes the accent of those who deplore the poetae very well indeed. Needless to say, they are deliberately written in atrocious Latin style, but that I cannot imitate:

I believe the devil is in these poets. They destroy all the universities and I've heard it of an old Magister of Leipzig, who taught there for thirty-six years, who said to me that when he was young the University was in good shape, for among twenty thousand students there was not one poet, and it was considered a scandal for any student to go to the market square without Petrus Hispanus or the Parva Logicalia under his arm. And when they saw a Magister they were as frightened as if they saw the devil... At that time the University truly flourished and if any of them confessed that they secretly heard a lecture on Virgil the priest imposed a heavy penalty... If only things were still like that in the University! Now when there are twenty students, hardly one of them wants to proceed to a degree, but all the others want is to study the humanities. And if the Magister lectures he has no audience, but the poets in their lectures have such an audience that it seems a miracle. And we must pray to God that all poets should die, for is it not better that a few poets should die than that all the universities should perish?[7]

This feeling of superiority over the traditionalist teachers was shared by the great Northern humanists, most of all by Erasmus of Rotterdam, who exulted in 1517, "Polite letters, which were almost extinct, are now cultivated by Scots, Danes and Irishmen."s The humanists had taught their pupils something which the others did not know — the ancient beauty of style.

It might be useful to put this in diagrammatic form:

Classical antiquity + Dark Ages — Recovery +
1300-1400

influenced by Vico, all history aimed at making man more human, an ideal he called *Humanität*.^[11] However much these thinkers differed — and we must not forget that Rousseau challenged the very faith in progress at the time — they were all concerned with the conditions that made for a good society.

In this respect the first cultural historian was certainly Voltaire, with his book *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* of 1756.^[12] In his *Age of Louis XIV* he had written of four periods of happiness in the past. Three were those of powerful rulers, of Alexander the Great, of Augustus, and of Louis XIV. But the fourth was the Renaissance for which he gave credit to a family of middle-class bankers, the Medici, who had done their duty by civilization which had been neglected by the Nobility and by the Church. The Age of Man, to refer to Vico's division, was a middle-class age where bankers favoured artists and scholars. It was a new interpretation that was consolidated in England in the late eighteenth century when William Roscoe published the first full biography of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1795. Roscoe's book expresses what has been called by Herbert Butterfield "the Whig conception of history." He was a Liverpool banker and a member of the Wilberforce movement for the abolition of slavery, and his interpretation of the Renaissance is coloured by his enthusiasm for liberty. Let me quote the opening lines of his first chapter:

Florence has been remarkable in modern history for the frequency and violence of its internal dissension, and for the predilection of its inhabitants for every species of science and every production of art. However discordant these characteristics may appear, they are not difficult to reconcile. The same active spirit that calls forth the talents of individuals for the preservation of their liberty, and resists with unconquerable resolution whatever is supposed to infringe them, in the moments of domestic peace and security seeks with avidity other objects of employment.

So the Renaissance was such a period of domestic peace when the active middle-class Italian turned to other objects of employment and created a new civilization. There was a link connecting the contradictory aspects of the period, its violence and its culture — even the individualism of the period, even the dissolution of the Church, as Macaulay stressed in his famous essay on Machiavelli of 1827.

But while the Renaissance was thus married, as it were, to the idea of political progress, the new age, the march of progress, the very events of the period when Roscoe wrote caused a reaction in the true sense of the term. This was the time of the French Revolution and also the time when these values of progressivism were thoroughly questioned by those who were disillusioned by the Revolution — the Romantics. The Romantics, who longed to go back to what had become known as the Age of Faith, denied the conventional valuation of the Renaissance because they saw destruction where the Renaissance and later periods had seen an upward movement. In diagrammatic form:

Classical Antiquity — Middle Ages + Renaissance —

For the Romantics the Age of Faith was the unitary age, when the individual still knew his place, and everybody joined in the building of cathedrals and when, generally speaking, there was no rift in the mind of men. The great upholder of this reading of the Middle Ages in England was John Ruskin, who hated the Renaissance and wrote — typically — in 1853 that the Renaissance scholars "discovered suddenly that the world for ten centuries had been living in an ungrammatical manner, and they made it forthwith the end of human existence to be grammatical."^[13] He was being satirical, but there is something more in this quip than some interpreters of the Renaissance may be ready to concede. In any case, for Ruskin the Renaissance- was pernicious, and it was pagan. It was part of death rather than of life because its art was created for the sake of enjoyment rather than for the sake of service.

What is important, and what I can only touch upon relatively briefly, is that these two opposing views could be reconciled by a sleight of hand in a larger, embracing system of historical philosophy, and this is what Hegel did by his dialectic. I am admittedly biased here for I have been convinced by Karl Popper's logical arguments that the pretensions of this method which have survived in Marxism are quite untenable.[14] Be that as it may, Hegel wanted to show that history could be seen as a vast syllogism, a logical progression which was therefore demonstrably inevitable. This is the meaning of his famous dictum that the real is the rational and the rational is the real.

For Hegel, the whole course of history, the whole development of the human mind, is a continuation of a cosmic process. It starts with the creation of the world and goes along the great chain of being, the ladder of creation; from stones we go to plants and from plants to animals, and from animals to man. So the various ages represent ever higher stages of awareness of the spirit or the Godhead in reflecting about itself. Therefore, one cannot, in history, speak of good or evil. The process of unfolding that goes on all the time embraces the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the coming of the Renaissance.

But the course of progress is not straight. From antiquity we could not have entered the Renaissance and importantly, the Reformation, right away. There had to be the stage of feudalism in the Christian countries, and every such stage is valuable in its own way, as a necessary step forward, for forward it goes. What led to the Renaissance, in Hegel's view, was that certain "internal contradictions" (as Marxists would say) made for the disintegration of the Middle Ages and created a new Age. Among these dissolving agents identified by Hegel was Art which turned man towards the sensual, the study of Antiquity which turned him away from heaven, and the geographical discoveries which turned the spirit outwards towards this Earth. To quote his own words at least in extract:

The term *humaniora* is very significant, for those works of antiquity celebrate what is essentially human and what makes us human. These three facts, the so-called Revival of Learning, the flourishing of the Fine Arts and the Discoveries of America and of the sea-route to the East Indies may be compared to the blush of dawn which for the first time after protracted storms announces a beautiful day. This day is the day of the Common Man, which breaks at last after the long, fateful and terrible night of the Middle Ages, a day that is marked by Science, Art and the urge to discovery, in other words by the most noble and exalted manifestations of the human spirit after it had been made free by Christianity and emancipated by the Church.

It is a movement which culminates for Hegel in the "all-transfiguring sunrise of the Reformation." Thus the idea of progress is saved, while the Romantic valuation of the Middle Ages is conceded through the notion of "historical necessity." [15]

Hegel's interpretation of the Renaissance had a tremendous influence, because he really consolidated the idea that any chronological period was marked by a distinctive "Spirit of the Age." Thus the Renaissance was not to be seen simply as a movement for the revival of certain values, but as an entirely new age, a new ring in the growth of humanity.

The most influential French historian — Michelet — says so quite explicitly in the volume he dedicated to the French Renaissance in 1855. He says in the Preface that he has devoted ten years of his life to writing the history of France in the Middle Ages, and ten years to the French Revolution. What

remains, he says, is to bridge the gap by writing the history of the Renaissance and the Modern Age. And he adds:

To the lover of beauty, the attractive word Renaissance implies no more than the arrival of new art; to the scholar it means a renewal of the studies of antiquity; to the lawyer, the end of the chaos of ancient customs. But is that all? If so, this colossal effort, a revolution of such scale and complexity and strength, had given birth to nothing. Could anything be more discouraging to the human mind?

But Michelet continues

These specialists had forgotten two things, small matters, it is true, which belong to that Age to a larger extent than to all the ages that came before: the discovery of the world and the discovery of man.

He lists Columbus, Copernicus, Galileo, Vesalius, Servetus, Luther, Calvin, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, as typical of this new discovery of the world and of the new discovery of man.[16] This preface became immensely important in the history of our study because five years later, in 1860, the great Swiss scholar, Jacob Burckhardt, published his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*,[17] in which he used this remark (which was an incidental or polemical aside by Michelet, who was himself very anti-clerical). He used it as a scaffolding for his book in which the civilization of the Renaissance became the discovery of the world, and the discovery of man. Henceforward we find very few books on the period where the discovery of man is not mentioned. Personally, I think it is time to put the catchword to rest. It was for this reason that I tried to show you how the word "man" got mixed up with the Renaissance, largely through the accident of the term *umanista* and its fusion with philosophies of progress which contrasted the Age of Man or of *Humanität* with early stages. As an historian I find it hard to picture any group of men and women who have not yet "discovered man," and harder still so to describe people whose religion, after all, centred on the belief that God himself had become Man. If the truth is to be told, I have come to regard the word Man with a capital M in any new book on the Renaissance as a kind of warning signal. It makes me suspect that I shall be subjected once more to a string of tired clichés, rather than being allowed to learn something new about the period.

We must not blame this on Burckhardt, who simply used Michelet's remark as a peg on which to hang his avowedly personal selection of facts. But I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere [18] that in doing so he also imposed a Hegelian interpretation on the period. He valued the Renaissance as the harbinger of the Modern Age, and he saw the Italians as the first-born of the moderns. But he achieved this interpretation by pushing back the frontiers of the Renaissance, so that anything he liked in the Middle Ages was promoted to the Renaissance. The songs of the wandering scholars of the twelfth century were made to herald the Renaissance, and Dante was made one of its principal witnesses, though few people would call Dante a Renaissance figure nowadays. Although the Renaissance remained the age of the discovery of man and the world, the border with the Middle Ages was partly dissolved.

I would hate to leave you with the impression that such criticism will dispose of Burckhardt. If one can call an historian a great man, he certainly is a candidate for this title. He knew, and he said, that his vision of the period was a subjective one and that other readers of the identical sources he had used might form a very different picture. But he had such artistic gifts that it was his vision which was generally accepted. And even when the time came for doubters to raise their voices it was from a criticism of his book that the debate invariably started.[19]

At first *The Civilization of the Renaissance* was a slow seller but a generation later it became immensely famous and popular, not only among historians but also with the general reading public. It touched a chord, because in the Victorian age the Renaissance had acquired a curious air of topicality. Its evaluation had an obvious bearing on some of the central issues of the nineteenth century, the issue of emancipation, of liberation from dogma, of social mobility. Individualism and liberalism were projected on to the Renaissance while Ruskin and the medievalizers drew their analogies of social virtue from the closed society of the Middle Ages.

If you walk through our cities you may notice that this allegiance to the two contrasting "ages" influenced the adoption of Gothic or Renaissance forms for building in the nineteenth century. Gothic was felt to be the essentially Christian style and thus churches, but also schools and colleges, were generally built in imitation of medieval buildings. The Houses of Parliament in London were also rebuilt in the Gothic style to recall the medieval roots of English liberties. Characteristically, such buildings as the Reform Club in London (1837) were designed on a Renaissance pattern. Indeed, when Palmerston had the Foreign Office designed by a famous architect, Gilbert Scott, in 1857, he rejected the first project, which was Gothic and insisted on a Renaissance building.[20] Apparently he sensed that on the Continent of Europe the medievalizers were identified with political reaction. It was in this charged atmosphere that there arose an almost hysterical cult of the Renaissance among the "progressives." Browsing in any old library you will find many, many books, historical novels, plays and travelogues crowded with colourful visions of Renaissance "supermen," highly artistic and highly unprincipled. Even serious histories such as J.A. Symonds's [21] panoramic views of the period are coloured by this bias. In France, Hippolyte Taine and Count Gobineau represent this trend, and in Germany the philosopher Nietzsche fostered it. The great essayist Walter Pater,[22] the now forgotten authoress "Vernon Lee," (Violet Paget), both saw in the Renaissance mainly a reaction to the Christian Middle Ages and therefore, in the words of *1066 and All That*, it was "a Good Thing." Certain standard quotations such as Lorenzo de Medici's Carnival Song in Praise of Youth were always wheeled out, often out of context, to colour this picture of a reaction against the medieval Church, a reaction, indeed, against Christianity — "the glorification of the body"; "the glorification of man" — and it was against these exaggerations that the reaction came.

Reinterpreting the Renaissance

Quite naturally it started largely in the Roman Catholic camp. The devaluation of the Age of Faith, of the Catholic period, when the world was united under one faith, naturally irked these scholars and they asked a number of connected questions. One of these questions was whether the Middle Ages had been as dark as all that; and the second one was whether the Renaissance had been as bright as all that. Each of these questions could be answered according to the selection of your material. But the first thing to note is perhaps the claim that, far from being in opposition to the rebirth of civilization, for which the Church had been pilloried, it was the Church, Christianity, which was responsible for the new turning, for the rediscovery of the world, and of man. Unlikely as it may sound, perhaps, the very man who brought about this great turning was not Petrarch, but St. Francis of Assisi. *He* praised the beauty of the creation, *he*, with his emphasis on individual conscience, first understood the individual, and therefore it is in the Franciscan movement (so the French scholar Sabatier[23] and his German contemporary, Thode,[24] claimed) that we must see the true beginning of the Renaissance. Moreover, far from being pagan, or anti-religious, the great humanists themselves were very religious people, as were the great artists. Now there is certainly a lot in that claim. If you go to the National Gallery, or any other collection, and look at Renaissance paintings it is not very hard to see that most of them represent the Virgin Mary. In other words, far from concentrating on pagan subjects, the Renaissance artists concentrated very much on traditional religious subjects. And if you then read the lives of the humanists and their patrons you will soon see that they were also very much concerned

with their own salvation; that they dedicated chapels and altars and were greatly worried about what would happen to them if they led a sinful life. So that the reaction against the cult of the Renaissance as something totally pagan was just as down to earth, as it were, in stressing the role of popular piety in this period. One of the people who had a share in this revision was Aby Warburg, the founder of the Warburg Institute.[25] There are a number of names, Zabughin, and Toffanin, and others, Roman Catholic writers, who stressed the importance of the religious ingredient in the Renaissance — sometimes even over-stressed it.

But another attack, and a more exact one, came against the schematic idea of a new age in which everything progressive had been discovered. This attack came from the history of science. You remember that the Renaissance was a devaluation, in some respects, of the Quadrivium, of the knowledge of numbers and of mathematics, and in fact it could be claimed that the Renaissance was not very fertile in scientific thought. The great break, as was particularly stressed by Lynn Thorndike,[26] comes only at the end of the sixteenth century. If we are interested in the history of science, we are not so much interested in what Petrarch recovered of the letters of Cicero as we are interested in one man, and that is Galileo Galilei, and his principal work falls after 1600.[27] Moreover, the despised scholastics, who were ridiculed by the humanists, were much better scientists than the Renaissance humanists had ever been. In fact in the Franciscan movement in Oxford, Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon and others, we have the dawn of Western science,[28] which continues in the universities in the discussions of certain problems such as the problem of impetus and the nature of movement, while the humanists remained in the past. True, there are outsiders like Leonardo, but the situation of Leonardo, who called himself a man without letters — *uomo sanza lettere* — is very ambiguous, and how much he owed to the scholastic books is again a matter for debate.[29] Now I believe that this view that all scientific progress is really medieval, and that the Renaissance was cultivating the arts at the expense of everything else is also a travesty of the truth. After all, what has become known as the Copernican Revolution is very intimately connected with the Renaissance. Copernicus was, among other things, a humanist who translated a minor Greek author into Latin and his search for an alternative world picture began with a scrutiny of such classical authorities as Cicero and Plutarch.

The question is now rather what it was that made Copernicus search these ancient texts. It is here that the interpretation of Renaissance science has taken an unexpected turn, of late, largely through the brilliant researches of Frances Yates[30] and D.P. Walker.[31] They have shown that the lost knowledge some tried to retrieve was not so much what we today would call scientific knowledge as mystical insights which were believed to give something like magical power. There is ample evidence for this irrational longing in the Renaissance, evidence which was largely played down by those who were committed to either the "progressive" or the "medieval" interpretation of the period. How much of Copernicus can be explained in this light is a different matter. Generalisations can easily become a trap and a snare unless they are controlled by a thorough reading of the sources.

This is really the point to which I wanted to come. What can any generalization about an "Age" ever tell us?[32] There are no "Ages", in the sense that there's a uniform spirit or mentality shared by everyone in a society. People differ in the degree of their education, in their partisanship, in their taste, in their intelligence and, as we know, in their opportunities. The question of who in the Renaissance was actually a Renaissance man would really be ludicrous if you asked it in those terms — certainly not the "hewers of wood and drawers of water," or the ordinary merchant, or the ordinary churchgoer. The number of people who talk about their age, who are articulate in that sense, is always small[33] — particularly before the invention of the mass media. Moreover they also are, each of them, individuals in quite a different sense. Human beings are complex; they may pay lip service to

one thing because an element of prestige is involved, while they may at the back of their mind, or in the hour of their death, suddenly remember their old pieties. Every person belongs in many layers to many aspects of civilization. What I think we can say, what I wanted to clarify a little, is that the Renaissance was not so much as "Age" as it was a movement. A "movement" is something that is proclaimed. It attracts fanatics, on the one hand, who can't tolerate anything that doesn't belong to it and hangers-on who come and go; there is a spectrum of intensity in any movement just as there are usually various factions or "wings." There are also opponents and plenty of neutral outsiders who have other worries. I think we can most effortlessly describe the Renaissance as a movement of this kind, but, needless to say, a description is not an explanation. What the historian would like to find out is rather what it was that made the Renaissance such a successful movement that it spread throughout Europe. Of course economics, the social position of the laity, the new role of the cities would have to come into any such analysis, but the question that should never be omitted is still why certain innovations are taken up and imitated by an ever increasing number of individual people. With technical inventions the answer is simple. They spread because they are useful. Take spectacles: we know when and where they were invented; in Pisa round about 1300. Two generations later spectacles were found in China because people who didn't see well found it immensely useful to have this thing made for them. In other words, we hardly have to ask in the case of inventions why they were adopted. Sometimes we might ask why something that has an obvious advantage doesn't catch on; there may be religious taboos in the way of their adoption. But very often the proveable superiority of inventions serves as a vanguard, as a path-maker, for other things, which then connect with the prestige that movement has acquired. Certainly Italian culture in the sixteenth century had a tremendous prestige in Europe; this also led to suspicion of Italy in England in the sixteenth century, "an Englishman Italianate is the devil incarnate." But the two things belong together: superiority creates envy, opposition and an insistence on traditional values, as we have seen it satirized in the *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*. Any change provokes criticism and some of the criticism may be quite justified.

I have concentrated on the solid achievement of the Renaissance movement which, alas, I cannot here demonstrate — I mean the recovery of an elegant and supple Latin style. I have not so far touched at all on another such achievement which filled the leaders of the movement with pride — I mean the so-called "rebirth" of art. Lovers of medieval art, not to speak of the champions of primitive styles or of the twentieth-century revolutions, naturally do not much care for these claims. Nobody, after all, thinks nowadays as Vasari had done in the sixteenth-century that the arts had been "dead" till the Florentines revived them around the year 1300. But this change in our taste should not and need not obscure the fact that certain inventions had been made in the period which gave Renaissance art an edge over earlier traditions. When Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), the German master, wanted to sum up what he meant by the "rebirth" or "renewed growth" of art, he spoke of two skills that the Italians had conquered — the science of perspective and that of drawing the nude.[34] Let me sum up in a few illustrations what this implied.

Perspective allows the artist to put his figures upon a convincing stage. This picture by Masaccio (fig.1: Masaccio: *St. Peter healing the sick with his shadow*) shows how he could handle perspective, whereas in the fresco (fig. 2: Masolino: *St Peter healing a Cripple*) by Masolino, painted not much earlier, the perspective is not correct and the buildings do not seem to cohere properly. This was what later artists and writers particularly objected to in paintings of the period before perspective was developed. It was demonstrable that certain mistakes had been made by earlier artists. Dürer admired Martin Schongauer, a master of the previous generation, but he appears deliberately to have corrected Schongauer's version of the Death of the Virgin (fig.3-4: Albrecht Dürer, *Death of the Virgin*; Martin Schongauer, *Death of the Virgin*) by making the perspective more coherent and consistent.

There was a solid achievement here which drew artists to Italy to learn what had been discovered. Or take the nude of which Dürer spoke. I believe that if we describe Giorgione's Venus (fig. 5: Giorgione, *Reclining Venus*) or Michelangelo's Adam (fig. 6: Michelangelo, *Adam*) — both painted around 1510 — as "beautiful" we are not simply expressing our subjective preference. I realise that ideals of physical beauty have varied from culture to culture and will continue to vary, but I am not sure that this observation warrants a complete relativism in these matters any more than in the case of perspective. We are not surprised, after all, that artists and laymen were deeply impressed, almost intoxicated, by the new mastery in creating beautiful images which had been achieved in Italy.

Not that this mastery could be achieved overnight. The creations of the great Renaissance artists remained in demand by princely collectors all over Europe because they were rightly felt to be unique. But the Renaissance style itself could be imitated and carried with it a certain glamour and prestige.

We have seen indeed that even in the nineteenth century, style could be used as something like a badge of allegiance. (It is still so used in our own time, regardless of whether we are modernists or traditionalists.) It is not too farfetched to think that building styles could function in the same way in earlier centuries. When a fifteenth-century lord or merchant insisted on his palace or villa being built in the style known as all'antica (in the manner of the ancients), he, too, wanted to proclaim his allegiance to the Renaissance movement, to show that he was a man of culture and of taste.

Like the pure style of Renaissance painting, the pure style of Renaissance architecture could not easily be mastered — it did not reach England before Inigo Jones in the seventeenth century. But it was always possible to pay tribute to the Italians by introducing some elements of the new repertory of forms, columns, pilasters, terms into one's design and it is in this way that Renaissance features first reached England, frequently via Flemish pattern books.[35] Like other Italianate forms in literature or in life, we may interpret them as tokens of respect for the Renaissance achievement.

The success or failure of movements such as the Renaissance depends on many factors, on fashion, on prestige, on the search for novelty. But unless we also take into account the possibility of real achievements, real conquests, history is really no more than "one damned thing after another." I have been critical of the various philosophies of progress and most of all of the metaphysical belief that the course of history is predetermined by some Hegelian spirit. But I think, with Karl Popper,[36] that a rejection of these determinist interpretations of history does not commit us to an acceptance of complete scepticism. Limited explanations are possible for limited problems. The detailed analysis of a given situation can sometimes enable us to ask sensibly what it was that secured the triumph of a particular movement in a given society. The success of the Renaissance was not simply an accident.

Question: One matter on which students might find it helpful to hear your opinion is that once the historiographical concept of the Renaissance is established, people tend to push it about. You mentioned how Burckhardt pushed it back, but we have gone further back than that since, have we not? Would you like to say something about this?

G: Certainly. An American scholar, C.H. Haskins, wrote a book called *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*,[37] and a very good book it is. There is, earlier, the "Carolingian Renaissance," meaning the attempt of Alcuin and others to recover or preserve the classics.³ This is really the theme of Erwin Panofsky's *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* which I quoted in my lecture and which has an excellent bibliography. There are many individual attempts, sometimes in relatively small circles — such as the School of Chartres, and others — to get back to these texts and to learn what they teach, but they differ in emphasis, and Panofsky wants to distinguish these "Resuscitations" from the great upsurge because he very much believed in a unitary age, which is the Renaissance.

Question: Was one of the reasons why he disallowed Chartres as a full-scale Renaissance and just called it a "Renaissance" its local character?

G: It is of local character, but Panofsky also has an interesting idea, which I am not quite sure is totally tenable though it is very fertile as he uses it. For him those processes of recovery in the Middle Ages did not really involve a conscious sense of distance — they thought that the ancients were still "our people," they still used "their texts." For Petrarch there is an intervening gulf. He looks at antiquity with a sense of distance, as some lost paradise which he wants to recover. A different age, in fact. Panofsky argues that it is this sense of distance that makes all the difference between local attempts to learn something about ancient authors and the systematic recovery of a lost age.

Question: You said that Petrarch went to a great deal of trouble to learn Greek and started to do so. When was Greece "rediscovered," opened up?

G: Actually, William of Moerbeke did go to Greece in the thirteenth century and translated Aristotle, but the real systematic study of Greek started when Florentine followers of Petrarch, Coluccio Salutati and others, seized on the opportunity that a Byzantine scholar — Manuel Chrysoloras — was coming to Italy and asked him to teach Greek in Florence. True, they paid him so little that after a very short time he left again but, even so, they had learned enough to go on on their own. The second element in the situation was South Italy. In Sicily, Greek was known and a Sicilian called Aurispa travelled to Byzantium when the craze for manuscripts had properly started and collected Greek manuscripts. For in Byzantium, of course, the works of Greek literature had never been forgotten and existed in the libraries. We owe it to Aurispa, largely, who was not a very attractive individual, that we have the Greek authors, for, as you know, Constantinople fell under the onslaught of the Turks, in 1453, and that was the end. Whether one would still have recovered many of these manuscripts later is an open question. So that if you look down a list of Greek authors, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, or whatever, you are very likely to find that the manuscripts came to the West through Aurispa. Sabbadini wrote the classic book on this recovery of ancient texts" and there was a famous book by a Cambridge Don — Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, [40] where you'll find a good deal of information about this, to which more recent research, of course, is always adding fresh information.

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The best brief introduction to the general problem is Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in its Historical Background*, Cambridge, 1961. Apart from the titles listed in the notes to this lecture, the student is advised to turn soon to original texts dating from the period, some of which are available in English translation. In this way a good first-hand idea of the Humanists can be obtained from their biographies written by the Florentine fifteenth-century bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci, translated as *The Vespasiano Memoirs* by W. George and E. Waters. The autobiography of the humanist Pope Pius II has been translated in a shortened version as *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope*, by F.A. Gragg and L.C. Gabel, New York, 1959.

For first-hand accounts of Renaissance artists we turn, of course, to G. Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, first published in 1550 (second ed. 1568), and existing in many translations. Vasari may not be a reliable historian, but he is a splendid eye witness of contemporary events and so his biographies of 16th-century artists are especially recommended. An equally immediate picture is conveyed by the famous *Autobiography* of Benvenuto Cellini, the Florentine goldsmith and sculptor (1500-1571) which also exists in many translations. The life of a small court is vividly evoked in one of the most famous and influential books of the period, Baldassare Castiglione, *The Courtier*, (1528) which became a popular handbook of manners in Elizabethan England in the translation by Sir Thomas Hoby, 1561.

Notes:

- 1 Stockholm, 1960.
- 2 Quoted in Panofsky, *op.cit.*, p. 10.
- 3 Paraphrased after Leonardo Bruni, *Dialogi ad Petrum Histrum*; the most accessible edition (and Italian translation) is in E. Garin, *Prosatori Latini del Quattrocento*, Milan, 1952. For this and the following see also my article "From the Revival of Letters to the Reform of the Arts: Niccolò Niccoli and Filippo Brunelleschi" in D. Fraser et al. (editors) *Essays in the History of Art presented to Rudolf Wittkower*, London, 1967.
- 4 Gino Rinuccini, *Invettiva contro a cierti caluniatori di Dante*. For references see my article quoted above, p. 74.
- 5 A. Perosa (ed.), *Giovanni Rucellai ed it suo Zibaldone*, London, 1960, p. 61. The phrase echoes Bruni's own praise of Petrarch.
- 6 Konrad Celtes, *Der Briefwechsel*, ed. H. Rupprich, Munich, 1934, pp. 56/7.
- 7 Francis Griffin Jones (ed.), *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*, 1909, II. 46 (somewhat shortened).
- 8 J. Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, London 1952 (with a selection of his letters), pp. 218 f.
- 9 J.B. Bury, *The idea of Progress*, 1920 (Dover paperback, 1955).
- 10 Giambattista Vico, *Scienza Nuova*, revised ed. Naples, 1744. English translation by T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch, 1948; Cornell paperback, 1970. For Vico's later influence see also Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 1940.
- 11 J.G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784-1791.
- 12 The full title is *Essai sur l'histoire generale et sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations depuis Charlemagne jusqu' á nos jours*, Geneva, 1756. There is an excellent chapter on Voltaire's influence in W.K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, Cambridge, Mass. 1948.
- 13 John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, III, in *Works* (London, 1903-12), vol. XI, p. 69.
- 14 K.R. Popper, *The Open society and its Enemies*, London, 1945, (Routledge paperbacks, 1967).
- 15 G.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. H. Glockner, Stuttgart, 1928, XI, pp. 516 and 518. There is an English translation of this work by T. Sibree, 1899, but the translation in the text is my own. See also my book *In Search of Cultural History*, Oxford, 1969.
- 16 J. Michelet, *Histoire de France*, VII, Paris, 1855, pp. i-iii.
- 17 J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 1860. There are many editions of the English translation by S.C.G. Middlemore.
- 18 *In Search of Cultural History*, as quoted above.
- 19 See W.K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, as quoted above.
- 20 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, London, 1936 (Penguin paperbacks, 1960).
- 21 J.A. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, (7 vols.) London, 1875-86.
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- 23 P. Sabatier, *Vie de St. Francois d'Assise*, Paris, 1894, English translation, London, 1894.
- 24 H. Thode, *Franz von Assisi und die Anfänge der Kunst der Renaissance in Italien*, Berlin, 1885.
- 25 See my *Aby Warburg, An Intellectual Biography*, London, 1970.
- 26 L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 7 vols., New York, 1923-41.
- 27 H. Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science*, London, 1949.
- 28 A.C. Crombie, *Augustine to Galileo: Science in the Middle Ages*, London, (1952, Mercury paperback, 1961).
- 29 For a balanced view see V.P. Zubov, *Leonardo da Vinci*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968.
- 30 F.A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London, 1964.
- 31 D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology*, London, 1972.
- 32 J. Huizinga, "The Task of Cultural History", in *Men and Ideas*, (Meridian paperback, 1959).

33 For a recent attempt to assess the "elite" in numerical terms see Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy*, London, 1972.

34 For the following see my article "The Leaven of Criticism in Renaissance Art" in C. Singleton (ed.) *Art, Science and History in the Renaissance*, Baltimore, 1967.

35 John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, (The Pelican History of Art), 1953.

36 K.R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London, 1957.

37 Cambridge (Mass.), 1927 (Meridian paperbacks, 1957).

38 Roger Hinks, *Carolingian Art*, London, 1935.

39 R. Sabbadini, *Le Scoperte dei Codici Latini e Greci ne' Secoli XIV-XV*, Florence, 1905; revised ed., 1967.

40 J.E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, Cambridge, 1908, esp. Vol. II, "From the Revival of Learning to the End of the Eighteenth Century."