

THE IDEA OF THE RENAISSANCE, REVISITED

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The idea of the Renaissance as a historical period was first formulated by Jacob Burckhardt in his book *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860). In this lecture I want to review some of the many directions taken by Renaissance studies since then, and to make some suggestions for future work.

In this essay I am going to revisit the beginnings of the Renaissance, a project which I intend to have two senses: the actual historical period, starting in fifteenth-century Italy, but also the beginning of a modern consciousness of that period, which I place in nineteenth-century Switzerland. Both projects are massive, obviously enough, so I shall only be able to pick out a few of the processes through which the Renaissance took shape, and also some of the agents responsible for shaping it. And I take “agents” to refer not only to human beings, such as Petrarca, but also to social roles (teacher, publisher...), books, and indeed languages (such as Greek).

Since history as a discipline involves a direct link between past and present, then the historian is always in some way trying to carry himself back to the past. Some words of Francis Bacon may stand as a motto for my enterprise:

For to carry the mind in writing back into the past, and bring it into sympathy with antiquity; diligently to examine, freely and faithfully to report, and by the light of words to place as it were before the eyes, the revolutions of times, the characters of persons, the fluctuations of counsels, the courses of actions, the bottoms of pretences, and the secrets of governments; is a task of great labour and judgement.... (1857-74: IV, 302).

I

One way of making sense of the past is to divide it up into epochs or periods, units of time which are thought to share some constants of structure,

behaviour, attitudes, marking them off from periods before or afterwards. It is easy to make fun of this periodization of history, as George Orwell once did:

When I was a small boy and was taught history —very badly, of course, as nearly everyone in England is— I used to think of history as a sort of long scroll with thick black lines ruled across it at intervals. Each of these lines marked the end of what was called a “period,” and you were given to understand that what came afterwards was completely different from what had gone before. It was almost like a clock striking. For instance, in 1499 you were still in the Middle Ages, with knights in plate armour riding at one another with long lances, and then suddenly the clock struck 1500, and you were in something called the Renaissance, and everyone wore ruffs and doublets and was busy robbing treasure ships on the Spanish Main. There was another very thick black line drawn at the year 1700. After that it was the Eighteenth Century, and people suddenly stopped being Cavaliers and Roundheads and became extraordinarily elegant gentlemen in knee breeches and three-cornered hats. They all powdered their hair, took snuff and talked in exactly balanced sentences, which seemed all the more stilted because for some reason I didn’t understand they pronounced most of their S’s as F’s. The whole of history was like that in my mind —a series of completely different periods changing abruptly at the end of a century, or at any rate at some sharply defined date.

Now in fact these abrupt transitions don’t happen, either in politics, manners or literature. Each age lives on into the next —it must do so, because there are innumerable human lives spanning each gap. And yet there are such things as periods. We feel our own age to be deeply different from, for instance, the early Victorian period, and an eighteenth-century sceptic like Gibbon would have felt himself to be among savages if you had suddenly thrust him into the Middle Ages. Every now and again something happens — no doubt it’s ultimately traceable to changes in industrial technique, though the connexion isn’t always obvious— and the whole spirit and tempo of life changes and people acquire a new outlook which reflects itself in their political behaviour, their manners, their architecture, their literature and everything else. No one could write a poem like Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” today, for instance, and no one could have written Shakespeare’s lyrics in the age of Gray. These things belong in different periods. And though, of course, those black lines across the page of history are an illusion, there are times when the transition is quite rapid, sometimes rapid enough for it to be possible to give it a fairly accurate date. One can say without grossly over-simplifying, “About such and such a year, such and such a style of literature began.” If I were asked for the starting-point of modern literature —and the fact that we still can call it “modern” shows that this particular period isn’t finished yet— I should put it at 1917, the year in which T. S. Eliot published his poem “Prufrock.” At any rate that date isn’t more than five years out. It is certain that about the end of the last war the literary climate changed, the typical writer came to be quite a different person, and the best books of the subsequent period seemed to exist in a

different world from the best books of only four or five years before.¹ (1971: ii. 229-30)

Yet, as his conclusion suggests, Orwell was able to make a good case for 1917 as a dividing point marking the beginning of a modern age. The dominant English writers up to 1914 were Hardy, Shaw, Wells, Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, A.E. Housman, all of whom were “untouched by any European influence,” being mostly preoccupied with English bourgeois society, its values and its typical activities. They had little sense of history (even Hardy), were not greatly interested in technique, and some of them (Shaw, Wells) had a crude sense of progress based on scientific discoveries and social engineering. Writers of the modern generation —T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence— had little faith in civilization as automatically improving human life, and were cultural pessimists rather than optimists. As Orwell sums up his argument, “They broke the cultural circle in which England had existed for something like a century. They re-established contact with Europe, and they brought back the sense of history and the possibility of tragedy” (240). If Lawrence was more conventional in terms of form, Eliot and Joyce were deeply conscious of technique, and made far-reaching experiments with form. One can make quite a good case for the modern age as stretching to the 1960s, perhaps...

Concepts of periodization have their validity, then. No less a figure than R.G. Collingwood, author of perhaps the most important work on historiography written by an Englishman, *The Idea of History* (posthumously published and edited by T. M. Knox, as we are now beginning to realize, with considerable editorial interventions) defended periodization in the course of summarizing medieval attitudes to history:

The great task of medieval historiography was the task of discovering and expounding this objective or divine plan. It was a plan developed in time and therefore through a definite series of stages, and it was reflection on this fact which produced the conception of historical ages each initiated by an epoch-making event. Now, the attempt to distinguish periods in history is a mark of advanced and mature historical thought, not afraid to interpret facts instead of merely ascertaining them; but here as elsewhere medieval thought, though never deficient in boldness and originality, showed itself unable to make good its promises. (1946: 153-4)

As Collingwood went on to show, medieval Christian historiography considered past, present, and future as being all part of a divine plan, with the future “as something foreordained by God and through revelation foreknown to man.” However, Collingwood asserted, “the historian’s business is to know the

¹“The Rediscovery of Europe”: broadcast talk, 10 March 1942; repr. in Orwell (1943), and in Orwell and Angus (1971: ii. 229-30).

past, not to know the future,” and any theory which divides “the historical process into two separate things,” with God’s objective purpose imposing a plan upon history “quite irrespective of man’s subjective purposes,” soon loses the ability to pursue “that prime duty of the historian, a willingness to bestow infinite pains on discovering what actually happened” (54-5) —and, I add, to discover what the events so painstakingly reconstructed meant then, and what they mean now.

As a historical period, the Renaissance became a widely-shared concept thanks to the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1819-1897). During his two-year teaching spell at the Polytechnikum, Zürich, as it was then called (today the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich), his first university appointment (1855 to 1857),² Burckhardt began the labour of analysing books and copying out excerpts for the work which appeared in 1860 as *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch*. Burckhardt owed some of his attitudes and ideas to Hegel’s two sets of *Vorlesungen*, one *Über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837), the other *Über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (1833-36), and he also drew on Jules Michelet, the sixth volume of whose *Histoire de France*, called *La Renaissance*, appeared in 1855. Both Hegel and Michelet had seen the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as antithetical, with the Renaissance as a secular liberation movement, freeing the human spirit from the chains of feudalism and religion. Burckhardt, whether consciously or not, absorbed categories and terminology from both writers, as scholars from Wallace K. Ferguson to E.H. Gombrich have shown, and he borrowed from Michelet a phrase characterising the Renaissance as having effected “the discovery of the world and the discovery of man.”³ But Burckhardt made a much larger and more systematic coverage than any previous writer, and must be credited for having put the idea of the Renaissance into wide circulation.

Burckhardt collected hundreds or thousands of quotations from his reading, which he cut up and mounted into quarto size books, still extant in the Basler Stadt Archiv (Kaegi 1947-1982: iii. 647-769, especially 656-7). He arranged this material under six main section headings:

INHALT

- Der Staat als Kunstwerk [The State as a Work of Art]
- Entwicklung des Individuums [Development of Individualism]
- Die Wiederweckung des Altertums [The Revival of Antiquity]
- Die Entdeckung der Welt und des Menschen [The Discovery of the World and Peoples]
- Die Geselligkeit und die Feste [Society and Festivals]
- Sitte und Religion [Morality and Religion] (1943: 11)

²See Kaegi (1947-1982: iii. 559-644).

³See especially Gombrich (1969: 6-25) on Hegel and his influence on Burckhardt.

We know that this outline does not correspond to Burckhardt's original plan, for he had originally intended to include a substantial treatment of Renaissance art (he was, after all, an art-historian). We also know that Burckhardt was himself conscious of major omissions, such as economic history. Indeed, scholars have compiled quite a large list of major subjects missing: Renaissance philosophy and science, for instance. W.K. Ferguson summed up some of the book's failings in 1948:

After generations of revisionism, it is easy to discern the faults in Burckhardt's synthesis. It was too static, too sharply delimited in time and space, the contrast with the Middle Ages and the other European countries too strong. It was limited moreover, as Burckhardt himself was at times aware, to the upper classes of Italy. It omitted the economic life of Italy almost entirely and underestimated the effect of economic factors. It overstressed the individualism, and with it the immorality and irreligion of Renaissance society, as well as its creative energy. Finally, the whole synthesis was built upon an insecure foundation, upon the doubtful assumption that there was a specific spirit common to Italian society for a period of two hundred years, that it was born of the mystical cohabitation of the antique spirit with the Italian *Volksgeist*, and that it was essentially modern, the prototype of the modern world. Yet for all its faults of exaggeration, it contained much brilliantly penetrating analysis, and a great deal of evident truth. And it was no more one-sided than many of the later revisions. (1948: 194)⁴

II

Despite its deficiencies, Burckhardt's book remains a stimulating introduction to some aspects of Renaissance life and art. If we ask where recent scholarship has improved on Burckhardt, we would soon have a long list,⁵ inevitably enough for any work written 140 years ago—that we can even pose such a question is already a tribute! We know a great deal more about the history of Italian politics in the period from 1400 to 1600, about economic life, urbanization, social history—especially hitherto marginalized groups, such as women and homosexuals. Huge amounts of archive material have been sorted, read, and analyzed, such as the Florentine *catasto*, the detailed tax returns started in the 1420s under the economic pressure of the war against Milan. We

⁴For other critiques of Burckhardt see, e. g., Huizinga (1959: 243-87); Klein (1979: 25-42); Sax (1986); Nelson (1933); Becker (1972); Ganz (1988); Farago (1994).

⁵The most comprehensive survey of modern scholarship was assembled by Rabil, Jr. (1988).

know a great deal more about Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, and the universities, but not as much as we ought to know about Stoicism and Epicureanism. Our knowledge of all the sciences —physics, mechanics, astronomy, mathematics, botany, biology, as well as the occult arts —astrology, alchemy, magic— is vastly greater than it was even 40 years ago, and has now gone beyond the mental capacity of any one individual to master. And so on: few areas of the Renaissance have not been studied, although of course there is much left to do —fortunately for the young!

I should like to pick out one area close to my own interests in which our understanding has advanced considerably since Burckhardt, namely the basic metaphor of the Renaissance: what exactly was this “rebirth”? What was “reborn;” when; how; and with what consequences? The term is not a modern invention, but was coined by men in the Renaissance to describe their belief that they had decisively broken with the Middle Ages, and renewed some key aspects of Greek and Latin culture. They summed up their interest in the past in the term *studia humanitatis*, which, as the late Paul Oskar Kristeller showed so well, described “a well-defined cycle of studies,... which included *grammatica*, *rhetorica*, *poetica*, *historia*, and *philosophia moralis*, as these terms were then understood. Unlike the liberal arts of the earlier Middle Ages, the humanities did not include logic or the *quadrivium* (*arithmetica*, *geometria*, *astronomia* and *musica*),” nor did they include the main subjects taught at universities during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, “such as theology, jurisprudence and medicine, and the philosophical disciplines other than ethics, such as logic, natural philosophy and metaphysics. In other words,” Kristeller reminds us, “humanism does not represent, as often believed, the sum total of Renaissance thought and learning, but only a well-defined sector of it” (1988: 113-14). The *umanista* or humanist, then, was not —as a modern parlance— a worshipper of “humanism” as a secular creed opposed to religion, but someone who studied the humanities. Humanism began outside the universities, in private circles and in the grammar schools of Northern Italy, and gradually infiltrated the universities, which —often after initial reluctance— established chairs of rhetoric and poetry, history and moral philosophy.

According to a long-established tradition, Renaissance humanism was born in Florence in the last third of the fourteenth century. This still seems largely true, but it must also be recorded, as Billanovich and Weiss showed some years ago, that a surprisingly detailed knowledge of the Latin poets existed in Padua already in the second half of the thirteenth century. These “prehumanists,” as they are now called, including Lovato Lovati, Geremia da Montagnone, and Albertino Mussato, knew the poetry of Lucretius, Catullus, the *Odes* of Horace, Tibullus, Propertius...; Seneca’s *Tragedies*, Ovid. But Padua was isolated as a cultural centre, Italian political life fragmented, and the work of this group of

writers remained unappreciated until the 1950s. Their work also represents the end of a tradition, not the beginning of a new one. The Renaissance attitude to antiquity is quite different to the medievals', for it attempts "to get closer to the classical spirit and to relive and rethink the past in terms of the present" —and viceversa (Reynolds and Wilson 1974: 110). In this respect the traditional account can be endorsed, in which the pioneer was Francesco Petrarca (1304-74).⁶ He was the first to use "the expression 'the Dark Ages' as a term of periodization" in order to describe the period between the end of the Roman Republic and his own age (1959: 109). As Theodor Mommsen showed, Petrarch took over the traditional Christian metaphor contrasting "the light, which Christ had brought into this world, with the darkness in which the heathen had languished before his time" (108), and applied this metaphor to secular history, dismissing the whole history of the Roman Empire once it became ruled by "barbarous' nations" and non-Roman emperors as "an era of *tenebrae*, or 'darkness'" (118, 121). Where medieval historians "continued the history of the Empire straight through to their own time... Petrarch introduced a new chronological demarcation in history" (125), so anticipating the scheme used by fifteenth-century historians. He saw himself as living in a period of decline, but in some utterances he looked forward to a brighter future —as in the conclusion of his epic *Africa* (1338ff):

My fate is to live amid varied and confusing storms. But for you perhaps, if as I hope and wish you will live long after me, there will follow a better age. This sleep of forgetfulness will not last for ever. When the darkness has been dispersed, our descendants can come again in the former pure radiance.
(*Africa*, IX. 451-7; tr. Mommsen: 127)

Martin McLaughlin (1988) has extended Mommsen's analysis showing that "elsewhere in the *Africa* Petrarch sees himself as a second Ennius halting the Muses' light from Italy (II.443-45) or rather recalling them to Italy after their long exile (IX. 222-31); and Petrarch regards himself as a protagonist in this renaissance partly because of his revival of the laurel ceremony in 1341 'after a gap of 1,200 years'" (132-3). The fact that Petrarch had himself crowned with a laurel wreath on the Capitoline hill, the first time a poet had been so honoured since Statius in 80 AD, was seen by Boccaccio and later writers as a cultural event of great significance, which would "usher in a golden age of poetry" (134). Petrarch's successors celebrated him as the writer who heralded this new light-bringing age, and many historians of the 15th and 16th centuries gave him main credit for the *rinascità*. One of the fullest and most explicit accounts was given by Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), the great Greek scholar who was Chancellor of Florence for the last sixteen years of his life. In his *Life of Petrarch* he wrote:

⁶ See Mommsen (1942); repr. in Mommsen (1959: 127).

Quickly his fame began to spread; he came to be called not Francesco Petracchi, but Francesco Petrarca, his name made greater out of respect for his virtues. He had such grace of intellect that he was the first to bring back into the light of understanding the sublime studies, so long fallen and ignored. Having grown since then, they have reached their present heights, of which I want to speak briefly. So that I may be better understood, I would like to turn to earlier times.

The Latin tongue and its perfections and greatness flourished most at the time of Cicero, for previously it was neither polished nor precise nor refined, but its perfection increased slowly until at the time of Cicero it reached its summit. After the age of Cicero it began to fall, and sank as in his time it had risen; not many years passed before it had suffered a very great decadence and diminution. It can be said that letters and the study of Latin went hand in hand with the state of the Roman republic, since it increased until the age of Cicero, and then after the Roman people lost their liberty in the rule of the emperors, who did not even stop at killing and ruining highly regarded men, the good disposition of studies and letters perished together with the good state of the city of Rome... Why do I bother with this? Only to show that as the city of Rome was devastated by perverse tyrannical emperors, so Latin studies and letters suffered a similar destruction and diminution, so that at the last hardly anyone could be found who knew Latin with the least sense of style. And there came over into Italy the Goths and the Lombards, barbarous and foreign nations who in fact almost extinguished all understanding of letters, as appears in the documents drawn up and circulated in those times; for one could find no writing more prosaic or more gross and coarse...

Francesco Petrarch was the first with a talent sufficient to recognize and call back to light the antique elegance of the lost and extinguished style. Admittedly, it was not perfect in him, yet it was he by himself who saw and opened the way to its perfection, for he rediscovered the works of Cicero, savored and understood them; he adapted himself as much as he could and as much as he knew how to that most elegant and perfect eloquence. Surely he did enough just in showing the way to those who followed it after him. (1987: 96-7)

Petrarch was not the only writer to be hailed as the renovator of poetry or ancient culture. Guido da Pisa had praised Dante: "Dante truly revived the art of poetry and made the ancient poets live again in our minds... for he brought dead poetry out of the darkness into the light" (McLaughlin tr. 1988: 133). In the *Decameron* Boccaccio praised Giotto ("avendo egli quella arte ritornata in luce": VI, 5) and celebrated Dante and Petrarch in similar terms. In 1395 Coluccio Salutati gave credit to Albertino Mussato, Geri d'Arezzo, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio (134-5). This sense of a cultural rebirth having taken place in Italy in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries is found clearly expressed in Matteo Palmieri, *Della vita civile* (1435); Leonardo Alberti in *Della Pittura* (1435); Lorenzo Valla, in the preface to the first book of his *Elegantie Lingue Latine* (1444); Flavio Biondo, *Italia Illustrata* (1456-60); and

so on. By the time that Giorgio Vasari wrote *Le Vite de' più eccellenti Architetti, Pittori, et Scultori Italiani de Cimabue insino a tempo nostri* (Florence, 1550; enlarged edn. 1568), the metaphor of *rinascità* had been grafted on to a biological model of the birth, growth and decline of the arts (taken from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*) in which the idea of a "renaissance of the arts" is extended to describe "the perfection to which they have attained in our own time."

Bruni's celebration of Petrarch as the renewer of culture emphasizes two inter-related acts: his rediscovery of classical Latin texts, and his ability to write a Latin style much closer to Cicero's than anyone had been able to do for over 1,000 years. The story of how the humanists recovered Latin authors was told brilliantly by Raffaël Sabbadini (1905-14, repr. Garin 1967) and it still has some of the excitement of a detective story. The manuscripts they recovered were copies made by scribes in the 9th to 11th centuries, but Petrarch and his successors were in a new position, conscious of being able to reconstruct a distant culture which had long lain in darkness, as they put it. These rediscoveries brought them into a direct contact with Roman authors as human beings: the fact that Petrarch discovered Cicero's letters to his friend Atticus (*Ad Atticum*) in 1345, in the Chapter library of Verona, made him, so to speak, a recipient of Cicero's correspondence, and he was moved to write a letter back to him, that famous epistle in which he reproached Cicero for having left the life of studies to take part in the rough and tumble of politics, with such fatal consequences (1985: 317-18). Petrarch also discovered Cicero's speech *Pro Archia Poeta* (in 1333, in Liège), which he quoted from in his own speech, composed for his coronation in 1341. As Michael D. Reeve recently pointed out, in his copy of *Pro Archia* Petrarch marked the passage where Cicero used the phrase *de studiis humanitatis ac litterarum*, which is the source for the phrase *studia humanitatis*, which gave Renaissance humanism its self-definition (1996: 21-2).

The most important discoveries in this early, formative period were of major texts in Roman rhetoric. At Lodi (near Milan) in 1421 Gerardus Landrianus, Bishop of Lodi, found a manuscript containing all three books of Cicero's major work, *De Oratore*, known until then in an incomplete text; the full version of his *Orator* (previously incomplete), and his *Brutus*, hitherto totally unknown. This manuscript was copied, and effectively deciphered by Gasparino Barzizza, a remarkably gifted classical scholar who ran a school at Padua between 1407 and 1421 which was more like a research institute in editing classical texts, and subsequently in Pavia and Bologna.⁷ Barzizza is the first of what I describe as the agents who propagated the Renaissance, doing so in his roles as teacher and editor. His pupils included Francesco Filelfo, George

⁷Cf. Mercer (1979), and the general study by Grendler (1989).

of Trebizond, Francesco Barbaro, Pier Candido Decembrio, Antonio Beccadelli (Panormita), Antonio da Rho, and L. B. Alberti. When that other great schoolmaster, Guarino of Verona, received a copy in 1422, he thanked his friend for the present: “I have heard that the complete *Orator* of Cicero has — by divine aid, I believe— returned from exile and from a long period of obscurity... Cicero on his renaissance (*renascens*) to the upper world fittingly chose you, Barzizza, as the first person on earth he would stay with...” (tr. McLaughlin 1988: 137) —that is, Cicero had been called back out of Hades. Equally important was the discovery by Poggio Bracciolini in 1416 of the complete text of Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* in the monastery of St. Gallen. Poggio announced this discovery, also to Guarino Veronese, in a letter which perfectly expresses the new Renaissance sense of rhetoric as a discipline fundamental to humanity, not a purely technical and vocational achievement as it had been in the Middle Ages, but an accomplishment that every educated person should acquire, essential both to his intellectual development and to the well-being of society. Indeed, the rhetorical treatises of the European Renaissance, and England in particular, emphasize the functionality of rhetoric as an expressive medium —as George Puttenham has put it, “a figure is ever used for a purpose, either of beauty or of efficacy.”⁸ Over the last sixty years scholars have recovered a great deal of information concerning rhetoric in the Renaissance, and we have begun to realize that it constituted an ever-present resource. The Psalm translations of Mary Sidney, as described by Gerald Hammond, are full of rhetorical figures. Shakespeare was perhaps the greatest rhetorician of all time. I once counted the number of times he used rhetorical figures in the *Sonnets* —it’s about 1,500.⁹ I am working together with Stefan Keller on a project to count and analyze his use of rhetorical figures in a representative sample of plays from all periods. We find that Shakespeare uses figures up to 2,000 times in a play, one figure every 2 or 3 lines. This is just an instance of the many important research topics awaiting young scholars.

The rediscovery of these classical texts opened up a new perception of the unity of Latin culture. It also had an immediate effect on the humanists’ own Latin style, for they took over from the Roman authors the technique of *imitatio*, that process of learning to copy an existing model until one has absorbed its essential elements and can reproduce them in a different language, writing on different themes. This was how the Romans themselves had absorbed and emulated Greek literature, philosophy, and other disciplines, and in the writings of Quintilian, Seneca and others the early humanists, beginning with Petrarca, found a fully-worked out theory of *imitatio* which they applied in the first instance in order to master classical Latin. As Martin McLaughlin has

⁸Cf. Vickers (1997: 332, ch. 6, “The Expressive Function of Rhetorical Figures”: 294-339)

⁹See Vickers (1984).

recently shown, while the Latin style of Petrarch and Boccaccio still retained unclassical elements from medieval Latin, Coluccio Salutati's epistolary Latin was transformed by his own discovery of Cicero's *Letters to his Friends (Ad Familiares)* in 1392 (McLaughlin 1995: 49, 69, 71). From this point on Salutati avoided non-classical diction and imitated Ciceronian formulae. The recovery of classical Latin was so rapid in Florence, McLaughlin shows, that Leonard Bruni's *Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Historum* (1401-6) stylistically, "as well as ideologically, inaugurate a new era. The language is the first instance of a total return to classical Latin, and of a complete mastery of the dialogue form..." (84). By the mid-fifteenth century Lorenzo Valla, in his dispute with Poggio Bracciolini, had attained a complete sensitivity to classical Latin, not only lexis but construction and syntax (132-3), with a remarkable awareness of linguistic and stylistic developments within Latin.

But the concept of *imitatio* also affected literary composition, with fruitful consequences for the Renaissance. In Roman literary theory *imitatio* was the first step, *emulatio* the second. A writer imitated his model but then went beyond it. He was supposed to ingest the original, absorb it into his metabolism, and then produce something new out of this exchange process, just as a bee converts pollen into honey.¹⁰ English Renaissance literature abounds with examples of creative imitation, which we can only appreciate if we know the model. Many of Ben Jonson's poems work off a classical text. You can read that lovely poem "Inviting a friend to supper" (*Epigrams*, CI), with its genial account of enjoying the other's company, sharing a very English meal, and discussing some literary topic, without knowing that it's in part a close imitation of two epigrams by Martial.¹¹ Once you know that it adds another dimension to your enjoyment of the poem, as you see Jonson taking over some elements, reshaping others, and fitting them into a new context that changes them still further. Shakespeare has many examples of creative imitation —the first 17 Sonnets, urging the young man to marry, are based on a model Epistle by Erasmus on the same topic.¹² Our recognition that *imitatio* was being practised all the time means that if we read the authors that Jonson and Shakespeare read, we will pick up many subtle details. Just before what turns out to be his final battle, Antony says "Let's have one other gaudy night," a phrase usually glossed as "celebration." But in the *Aeneid* Virgil describes the feasting that took place in Troy the night before the fatal entrance of the huge model horse, as a "*gaudia noctem*." In his 115th Epistle Seneca took the phrase for his text,

¹⁰See White (1935; 1965, 1973).

¹¹See Jonson (1975: 70-1).

¹²See Vickers ed. (1999: 22-39, and Index, p. 653, s. v. "*imitatio*").

moralizing on the folly of sensual indulgence. Shakespeare sets an echo going in the reader's mind who knows Virgil or Seneca.¹³

The recovery of Cicero's authentic texts, and the practice of *imitatio*, are two factors which account for the renaissance of classical Latin in the early fifteenth century. But one other factor I have yet to consider, "something that" — as Michael Reeve has recently put it — "overshadows all other advances in the Renaissance and more than anything else entitles it to that name: the return of Greek to Western Europe" (1996: 32). Petrarch had owned manuscripts of Greek authors, Homer and Plato, which he revered but could not read. Petrarch actually took Greek lessons briefly in 1342, when he was in Avignon, from a Calabrian monk named Barlaam, who had spent some time in Constantinople, and again in 1359-60, from another Calabrian called Leonzio Pilato, who was hired to teach Greek in Florence in 1360 (Mann 1996: 15-16). These were recognitions of a need, perhaps, but one which was not properly met until the visit to Florence in 1390 by a Byzantine diplomat, Manuel Chrysoloras, who led an embassy from Constantinople to seek help against the Turks. Six years later the University of Florence invited Chrysoloras to come and teach Greek grammar and literature, in a letter written probably by Coluccio Salutati himself (Reeve 1996: 33-4). Chrysoloras arrived in 1397, and taught in Florence for ten years. Some idea of the excitement that his visit aroused can be gained from the recollection that Leonard Bruni set down some forty years later:

At this time I was studying the Civil Law, though I was not an ignoramus in other subjects. For it was my nature to feel a burning passion for studies, and I had devoted no little effort to dialectic and rhetoric. Thus I was actually of two minds when Chrysoloras arrived, as I thought it shameful to abandon the study of the law, and at the same time a sort of crime to miss such an opportunity to learn Greek. So, in a youthful spirit, I would often ask myself: "When you have a chance to see and converse with Homer and Plato and Demosthenes and the other poets and philosophers and orators, about whom such wonderful things are said, and to acquire the wonderful education that comes with their study, will you leave yourself in the lurch and deprive yourself of it? Will you pass up this god-given opportunity? For seven hundred years now, no one in Italy has been able to read Greek, and yet we admit that it is from the Greeks that we get all our systems of knowledge. What a contribution to your knowledge, then, and what an opportunity to establish your reputation, and what an abundance of pleasure will the knowledge of this language bring you! There are plenty of teachers of the Civil Law, so you will always be able to study that, but this is the one and only teacher of Greek; if he should disappear, there would be nobody from whom you could learn."

¹³See Vickers (1999).

Overcome by such arguments, I took myself to Chrysoloras, with such an ardor to study that what I learned in my waking hours during the day, I would be working over at night even in my sleep. (Bruni 1926: 23-4)

Chrysoloras represents the second of my agents in the growth of the Renaissance, the schoolmaster as mediator between ancient and modern cultures, a figure of enormous cultural importance. His pupils included many of the intellectual avant-garde of Florence, “the leading minds of the age. He numbered Guarino, Bruni, d’Angeli and Vergeri among his pupils. He corresponded with Filelfo and Barzizza; and he became an intimate friend of Niccolò Niccoli” (Bolgar 1954: 268-9). When Chrysoloras returned to Constantinople for awhile in 1400 one of his outstanding pupils, Guarino, followed him there and spent five years studying Greek. Filelfo also went to study in Byzantium, and “married the daughter of J. Chrysoloras, the master’s nephew and successor. Datus who had studied under Filelfo and had then imitated Guarino’s pupil, Valla, united the two traditions” (432). Two years of Chrysoloras’ teaching in Florence enable Leonardo Bruni to translate Plato’s *Phaedo* into Latin, and laid the basis for his long career as a translator of major texts by Plato and Aristotle. Chrysoloras is being increasingly seen in recent work on the Renaissance as a key figure, in several respects. First, he produced the first Greek Grammar in modern times, the *Erotemata* (“Questions”), which Guarino adapted, and from which Erasmus and Reuchlin learned Greek. Secondly, Chrysoloras’ instruction in Greek was carried out in Latin, and he must have had an excellent command of that language, which rubbed off on his pupils. Martin McLaughlin has recently attributed Leonardo Bruni’s suddenly-acquired “sensitivity to lexis and prose rhythm that allowed him to arrive at an almost perfect imitation of Ciceronian periods” to the “expertise in Greek” which he acquired from Chrysoloras (1995: 85). In another recent book, Christine Smith draws attention to the surprising fact (as she sees it) that the many praises of Chrysoloras following his death in 1415 referred to his having “restored the splendor and dignity of the Latin language” (1992: 133-6). As Smith rightly deduces, “the critical and methodological tools with which he provided the Italians enabled them to pursue Latin learning,” too (135). Smith shows that Chrysoloras was heir to the Byzantine rhetorical tradition, unbroken from the Hellenistic period to the Middle Ages, and that he undoubtedly introduced his Florentine pupils to later Greek rhetoric, such as the Second Sophistic authors, Hermogenes, and the rhetorical genres developed in Byzantium, “such as the *encomion*, the *ekphrasis*, and the *comparison*” (136). She convincingly argues that Chrysoloras influenced the *laus urbis* (or “Städtelob”) produced in Florence, such as Pier Paolo Vergerio’s description of Rome of around 1398 (174ff.), by his own expertise in the genre, seen in his *Comparison of Old and New Rome* written in Rome in 1411, a copy of which he sent to Guarino in Florence who disseminated it among other humanists (150-

170). Professor Smith has opened up several important avenues for future research, which I hope will be pursued.

But in addition these specific effects on his Florentine pupils' Latin style and knowledge of rhetorical genres, it can be argued that it was Chrysoloras' teaching methods which had the greatest influence, at the basic level of the grammar school classroom. It is no accident that the revolution in teaching which made the Renaissance an educational phenomenon came from the schools, not the universities. Then as now, universities are complex systems which are very hard to change. Innovations, as Roberto Weiss said, are easiest to implement when one gifted individual can put them into practice, and the new grammar schools which sprung up in the early 15th century became the centres for the growth of humanism. Chrysoloras had a number of outstanding pupils who were so inspired by his teaching that they themselves wrote educational treatises expounding his new approach: Pier Paolo Vergerio's *De Ingeniis moribus et liberalibus studiis adolescentiae* (1400-02), Guarino's translation of Plutarch's *De Liberis educandis* (1411), Bruni's *De studiis et litteris* (c. 1425), and the treatise by Battisto Guarino, *De modo et ordine docendi et discendi* (c. 1459), which explicitly records the teaching methods of his father. As Robert Bolgar, one of my teachers at Cambridge, put it, "Chrysoloras laid the strongest possible stress upon reading. It was to be wide, attentive, and analytical. The student was to note every expression which struck him as apt or colourful; and he was to impress them upon his memory by a constant repetition until their use became second nature to him" (1954: 87). Chrysoloras' "new method" encouraged teachers "to look beyond the general structure of the writings they expound. They are to pay more attention to the minutiae on which literary excellence ultimately depends," not just words but "tropes, figures and all the ornaments of style" (269). The complementary advice concerns what Bolgar calls "that humble auxiliary without which the most painstaking analysis would have been to no purpose," the note-book (269). "Reading was always analytical": material was collected to be re-used, for the teacher should combine reading and composition (270), in a constant process of recycling knowledge, imitation leading to emulation. The methods taught by Chrysoloras and expounded by Bruni and Guarino spread throughout Italy by the mid-fifteenth century, and were duly taken up by some of the most influential figures in the Renaissance north of the Alps: Rudolph Agricola, Juan Luis Vives, Erasmus, and many others (271-5). Erasmus suggested that every scholar should read the whole of ancient literature twice, once for the content and once for the style, taking notes as he went. He followed his own advice, and inspired generations of students to follow him. The note-books of many Renaissance writers have survived, and would repay further study. Certainly we can say that without the notebook technique much of Renaissance literature would have been impossible: think of Rabelais, Montaigne, Francis Bacon,

Shakespeare, Milton. The commonplace book had an enormous influence on Renaissance habits of thought, as Ann Moss (1996) has shown. The essentially utilitarian manner in which Renaissance humanists approached literature, as an arsenal of resources which could be re-used in their own composition, soon gave rise to a new genre of book, in which the raw materials for writers were selected and arranged in some useful sequence, often alphabetical. Industrious compilers produced ever more comprehensive dictionaries of proverbs, comparisons, similes, metaphors, phrases, and rhetorical figures. The budding writer no longer need to read the whole of ancient literature: modern middlemen were doing it for him.

III

The “idea of the Renaissance,” then, is not a simple chronological label, but implies a definite attitude to the near and the remote past. As Herbert Weisinger, a pioneer in documenting the Renaissance’s self-awareness, put it, “the term ‘Renaissance’ is a Renaissance invention and it carries with it a theory of history. It assumes an identity between the Renaissance and classical times, or at least a community of interests, and insists that in the period between the fall of Rome and the middle of the fourteenth century or thereabouts the spirit which distinguished the ancients and the moderns was absent” (1945: 467). Renaissance scholars also shared a common desire to reconstruct past culture. They deliberately sought out classical texts, re-edited them with an increasingly rigorous system of textual criticism, which reached a high point already in the work of Poliziano (Reeve 1996: 29-30). They developed a historical sensitivity to authentic Latin style in the course of its evolution, so that Lorenzo Valla in 1440 was able to dismiss the *Donation of Constantine* as a forgery on linguistic grounds. The reading and writing methods taught by Chrysoloras and his pupils spread throughout Europe, influencing all forms of composition, in poetry and prose, from imaginative literature to technical treatises.

A second and larger wave of Greek influence took place in the 1450s, following the fall of Byzantium to the Turks in 1453. The Byzantine emigrés included many outstanding scholars and translators, such as Johannes Argyropoulos, who taught at Florence and Rome, and translated six major works of Aristotle into Latin, displacing Bruni’s pioneering versions. Another key figure was Bessarion, a Byzantine monk who rose to become a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, and made an excellent version of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, still the standard Latin translation up to the 19th century. Bessarion had a huge library, including some 500 Greek books alone, and the fall of the

Greek empire made him form the plan of building as complete a collection possible of Greek books for those of his fellow-countrymen who had fled to Italy. He presented it during his lifetime (in 1468) to the city of Venice to form the basis of a public library. Bessarion's protégés included other outstanding scholars, such as Theodore Gaza, George Trapezuntius, Poggio, and Valla. These in turn produced gifted disciples —Gaza's included Ermolao Barbaro, a formidable scholar. Bessarion is an outstanding example of the third type of agent I single out: the collector of manuscripts.

But the influence of antiquity was not limited to questions of language and literary form. The confrontation with Greek (especially) and Roman writings on mathematics, mechanics, engineering, architecture, painting, music, medicine, biology, botany, rhetoric and politics had an enormously stimulating effect on all those subjects in the Renaissance. When Greek botanical texts were rediscovered and translated into Latin in the sixteenth century publishers wanted to illustrate them with elaborate woodcuts, but the artists found that the plants they were drawing did not correspond to the written descriptions. This discrepancy stimulated a whole new discipline of botanical description.¹⁴

I could follow any of these subjects, but as a particularly interesting example of cultural influence I shall choose mathematics. The Australian scholar Paul Rose (1975) has shown that the Renaissance of mathematics in the 16th century derived directly from the confrontation with Greek mathematical texts by a gifted line of humanist scholars whose knowledge of Greek and Latin enabled them to restore the original texts, purged of medieval distortions. The precursor of the Italian mathematical renaissance was Regiomontanus (Johannes Müller, b. 1436), who studied at the University of Vienna with the humanist and astronomer Georg Peurbach. Regiomontanus represents the fourth type of agent I wish to mention, the scholar editor / translator, who makes the basic texts available in accurate reliable editions. Cardinal Bessarion, the great collector of Greek manuscripts, visited Peurbach in Vienna in May 1460, and urged him to revise and write a new commentary on Ptolemy's *Almagest*. After Peurbach's premature death in 1461 Regiomontanus accompanied Bessarion to Venice in 1462, who taught him Greek and encouraged his humanistic studies. The *Epytoma Almagesti* (finished in 1462; printed at Venice, 1496) proclaimed the great "significance of Greek for the renewal of astronomy" (1975: 93-4), a theme to which Regiomontanus returned in many subsequent writings during his time as professor of mathematics at the University of Padua. Moving back to Northern Europe, Regiomontanus issued at Nuremberg in 1474 a *Programme* of the writings on mathematics which he intended to edit or translate, the first list to give an idea of the scope of Greek mathematics. The authors listed include

¹⁴See the classic study by Arber (1912; repr. 1990).

Euclid, Archimedes, Theodosius, Apollonius, Hero, Proclus and others, on all of whom he worked (104-6). As Rose puts it, Regiomontanus “set the pattern for the combination of mathematics and humanist learning so typical of the renaissance of mathematics” (107). Like his successors, he moved between the “main centres of European humanism” (109), and had access to great manuscript libraries, including Bessarion’s own collection (99) —his patron had set out to collect the whole of Greek literature.

Copernicus learned Greek during his studies at the University of Bologna between 1496 and 1500, perhaps taught by Antonio Codro (120). The Greek dictionary that he used, the *Lexicon Graeco-Latinum Johannis Chrestonii* (Modena, 1499), is still extant in the University Library at Uppsala, and there is ample evidence of his study of Greek authors, both in the original language and in translations (129). The University of Bologna “was the most distinguished school of mathematics in Renaissance Italy,” with up to eight professors at a time (145). But knowledge was not limited to the north: Francesco Maurolico, “perhaps the greatest geometer of the sixteenth century,” grew up in Messina, the son of a Greek physician. His father had studied under Constantine Lascaris, who had been nominated to the chair of Greek by Bessarion (159), and whose pupils included cardinal Pietro Bembo (161). Maurolico wrote to Bembo in 1540, inviting him to become the patron of a renaissance of mathematics based on a fresh collation of old manuscripts (161-2). He had already edited Euclid, Hero’s *Pneumatica*, Archimedes, and Apollonius. Maurolico was unusual within the humanist tradition in that he did not simply reprint the ancient text, being “concerned purely with the mathematical aspects of the text,” rather than “its literary integrity.” So he reworked entirely the first four books of Apollonius’ work on conics, “adding, shortening and omitting proofs” as he pleased. Unorthodox his approach may have been, but “the result... was the first advance in the theory of conic sections since antiquity” (166). Maurolico published a collection of nine works on spherics and astronomy in 1558, mixing Greek texts by Theodosius and others with his own mathematical works. He lectured in mathematics at the Jesuit university of Messina, and had close contact with the Jesuit mathematician Christopher Clavius (175), but his remote position and lack of patronage meant that he never achieved the influence he deserved.

A greater recognition of the importance of Greek mathematics was achieved by three distinguished teachers from Urbino, Federico Commandino and his pupils, Guidobaldo dal Monte and Bernardino Baldi, both of whom praised their master as the restorer of mathematics (185). Commandino studied at Rome in the 1530s with Gian-Pietro de Grassi, mathematics tutor in the service of cardinal Niccolo Ridolphi, “one of the great humanist bibliophiles of the sixteenth century,” whose “remarkable collection of over 600 Greek

manuscripts” included “43 important Greek mathematical texts” (186). Commandino himself moved permanently to Rome in the early 1550s under the patronage of the Farnese, through whom he came into contact with a distinguished amateur of mathematics and collector of mss., cardinal Marcello Cervini, who made his remarkable collection available to him. “Like his predecessors, Commandino seems to have been galvanised by recognition of the poor state of contemporary mathematics” (214), and launched an astonishing series of texts, publishing a large edition of Archimedes in 1556 (194-6), followed by the *Planispheria* of Ptolemy and Jordanus in 1558. Subsequently he published a further work by Archimedes, *On Floating Bodies* (1565), together with his own *De Centro Gravitatis*, addressing an important problem in Renaissance mathematical thought, the centre of gravity of solids (202). In 1566 Commandino brought out a “magnificent edition of Apollonius” in translation, and in 1572 an edition of Euclid with an important preface on the history of mathematics. As Rose observed, Commandino agreed with Regiomontanus and Maurolico “that the best way to... restore mathematics was to revive the Greek mathematicians, a notion evident in the preface to his 1572 Euclid and reiterated in most of his works” (214). Commandino died in 1575: posthumously published were his translations of Hero in 1575, and of Pappus in 1588 (209-11).

Commandino’s pupil Guidobaldo dal Monte published in 1577 his *Liber Mechanicorum*, which was “recognized as the most authoritative treatise on statics to emerge since antiquity, and... remained pre-eminent until the appearance of Galileo’s *Two New Sciences* of 1638. It marks the highpoint of the Archimedean revival of the Renaissance” (222). In 1588 he brought out a *Paraphrasis Archimedis*, sending a copy to Galileo (226). Guidobaldo’s range was wide: his writings cover “mathematics, mechanics, optics and astronomy,” over a thirty year period (229). Guidobaldo corresponded several times with Galileo between 1588 and 1606 (225-7), and exerted an influence on him which Galileo publicly acknowledged in the *Two New Sciences* of 1638, and in a letter of the following year (233-4), recording his debt to Guidobaldo as the transmitter of some important Archimedean ideas.¹⁵ As Paul Rose summed up this tradition,

The fact that Commandino, Maurolico and Regiomontanus all concentrated upon reviving the same authors indicates that the programme necessary for the restoration of mathematics was a fairly obvious and agreed one. Thus, for all of them Archimedes was the most important, followed by Euclid, Apollonius and Diophantus. The benefits of this revival were immediate, as may be seen in the flourishing of researches on conics, sundials, and centres of gravity which characterises the latter half of the sixteenth century.

¹⁵ See the admirable recent edition by Besomi and Helbing (1998).

Ultimately, too great a reliance on Archimedean purity was to make it difficult for such of Commandino's disciples as Baldi and Guidobaldo to go beyond Greek mechanics. But within 25 years of Commandino's death the first step in founding the mechanics of the seventeenth century was to be taken by Galileo when, in criticising the inclined plane theorem of Pappus, the Tuscan mathematician adumbrated the notion of inertia. This step was not taken in an intellectual vacuum, but represented the culmination of the mathematical renaissance that had been achieved by the *restauratores*. (214)

A recent history of seventeenth-century philosophy has thrown fresh light on Galileo's debts to Greek mathematics (Garber & Ayers 1998).¹⁶ Peter Dear shows that Galileo's advocacy of geometrical analysis derived from Pappus of Alexandria's *Collectiones mathematicae*, published in Latin in 1589 (151); Alan Gabbey's account of "new doctrines of motion" brings out well Galileo's individual development of Peripatetic theories (651-2), while Michael Mahoney acutely shows both the advantages and limitations of Galileo's inheritance from Archimedean mechanics and scholastic kinematics (706-14).

A similar involvement with Greek mathematics can be traced in the work of Johannes Kepler, who was instructed in Greek at the monastery schools of Adelberg and Maulbronn, then at the university of Tübingen, under the prominent Greek scholar Martin Crusius. In his first job as mathematics teacher at the Lutheran school in Graz (1594-5) Kepler was "asked to teach Vergil and rhetoric as well as arithmetic" and mathematical astronomy (Gingerich 1973: 289). As Nicholas Jardine and Alain Segonds have shown, "Aristotle pervades Kepler's Works: he is the fourth most frequently cited author, after Brahe, Copernicus and Ptolemy" (1999: 206). Kepler knew "almost the entire Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian corpus," and was able to translate part of *De caelo* into both Latin (c. 1600-01) and German (c. 1614). He used Book 12 of *Metaphysica* to reconstruct Eudoxean and Calippean planetary models (207), and even reinterpreted the text to claim that Aristotle retained traces of a Pythagorean heliocentric system (222-30). If Kepler used Aristotle as "a source of the most ancient astronomical doctrines," he was equally at home in the Platonic tradition. His first published work, the *Mysterium cosmographicum* (1596), was "the first unabashedly Copernican treatise since *De revolutionibus* itself" (Gingerich 1973: 291), but its central idea derives from Plato's *Timaeus*, with its theory of matter "described entirely in terms of geometrical properties and geometrical relationships, that is, in terms which can only be applied to mathematical entities" (Field 1998: 3). Starting with the basic triangles, Plato describes the five convex regular polyhedra, the cube, the tetrahedron, the octahedron, the dodecahedron, and the icosahedron (6-7). Kepler took the five Platonic solids as the basis of a cosmological theory to explain the gaps between

¹⁶ See also my review in *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 54, forthcoming.

neighbouring planetary orbits (36ff.), claiming that it confirms Copernicus' theories (51). Throughout his career Kepler drew inspiration from Greek mathematics: his *magnum opus*, the *Harmonices Mundi libri quinque*, grew directly out of his confrontation with Euclid's *Elements* —indeed, Kepler said that “if Proclus had left a commentary on Book X of Euclid's *Elements* then he, Kepler, would not have needed to write the present work” (99).

A quotation from Proclus' Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's *Elements* appears on the title page of Book One of Kepler's *Harmonices Mundi* in the original Greek: in translation it reads:

Mathematics also makes contributions of the very greatest value to physical science (i. e. the study of nature). It reveals the orderliness of the ratios according to which the Universe is constructed and the proportion that binds things together in the cosmos... It exhibits as every where clinging fast one to another in symmetry and equality, the properties through which the whole heaven was perfected when it took upon itself the figures appropriate to its particular region. (1970: 19)

As Judith Field has commented, although Books I and II of the *Harmonices Mundi* “are constructed as series of axioms, definitions and propositions, reminiscent of the *Elements* not only in their style but also in their mathematical rigour,” what Kepler offers is rather more than a commentary on Euclid (1998: 101). He goes his own way, of course, but it was a way inspired by the recovery of Greek mathematics. Kepler called Euclid “the thrice-greatest philosopher” (177), and he also made no secret of his debts to Proclus (167-171), Plato (171-6) and to Ptolemy, whose work on music theory, the *Harmonica*, inspired much of the later books of the *Harmonices* (163-6).

With Galileo and Kepler we have reached the turning-point from the renaissance to what is now known as the Early Modern Period, and what used to be called the Scientific Revolution. My point is that the humanist tradition carried right on through into the seventeenth century, as scholars are now beginning to recognize. Jill Kraye of the Warburg Institute published a very useful “state-of-the-art” handbook in which the authors discuss “the survival of humanism into the seventeenth century and beyond” (1996: xv). Throughout this period the Greek mathematical texts continued to play a fertilizing role. Michael Mahoney has recently documented the ongoing fruits of the Italian humanists' recovery of Greek mathematical texts, most notably in the work of the great French mathematician, François Viète. In a number of books published between 1591 and 1615, Viète drew on Pappus's *Mathematical Collections* and other works by Euclid, Theon, and Apollonius, as edited by the humanists, to formulate new conceptions of analysis and synthesis, combining Greek mathematics with Arabic algebra. In his *Géometrie* (1637) Descartes, although

objecting to the “barbarous” notation of Arabic algebraists, followed Viète and extended his analytic programme, drawing on Apollonius’s *Conics*, as did Pierre de Fermat in his roughly contemporary work on plane and solid loci (726-30). These new techniques of geometrical-algebraic analysis opened the way for the great break-through of Leibniz’s calculus, and it is significant that in a letter written to Huygens in 1691 Leibniz admitted the debt that contemporary mathematicians owed to the Greek tradition, describing his calculus as “giving us all the advantages over Archimedes that Viète and Descartes have given us over Apollonius” (738).

IV

My account of the gradual shift from the Renaissance to the “Early Modern” period avoids the error mocked by George Orwell, of defining historical periods as a series of “abrupt transitions” at “some sharply defined date,” and endorses his view that “Each age lives on into the next.” But the case I have been making goes rather further than that. I am claiming that the work of Kepler, Galileo, François Viète, Fermat, and Leibniz could not have taken shape without the achievements of the (largely Italian) humanists. They could not have been exposed to Greek mathematics if their predecessors had not had the scholarly knowledge necessary to produce a more or less coherent and accurate text; those editors could not have done their work if bibliophiles and far-sighted collectors had not amassed Greek manuscripts; and the whole enterprise would have been impossible had not the need to study Greek, and the practical possibility of mastering that language, been presented as an essential goal by Chrysoloras and his pupils. And they, in turn, could not have started that enterprise had they not received a grammar-school education which had given them a firm grasp of Latin, a realization that ancient texts could be restored by careful philological work, and above all a belief that the past could be recaptured.

Such being the relationship between Renaissance humanism and the new sciences as I understand it—drawing on the work of scholars much more learned than myself—I may be allowed to express my unhappiness with a recent fashion, deriving from the great upheaval in intellectual attitudes that has been going on since the 1960s, which would like to banish the term “Renaissance” altogether. Jonathan Bate recently commented on the need for

a sustained rehabilitation of the word that used to serve as shorthand for the high European tradition and its classical inheritance: “Renaissance.” This

term has been banished from *bien-pensant* academic writing, on the grounds that it is offensive not only to the era which Renaissance boosterism unfairly dismissed as the “Middle” or “Dark” Ages, but also to the people of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who —it is assumed— did not benefit from the rebirth of ancient learning (non-aristocratic women, the illiterate, the colonized et al.). (2001: 6)¹⁷

Certainly the programmatic celebrations of a *rinascità* by Petrarch and others were unfair in some respects to the Middle Ages, but there must be few Renaissance scholars today who share that failing. Most of them are keenly aware of what the Renaissance owed to its predecessors, and in what ways they innovated. It is true that non-aristocratic women did not benefit from the new learning, indeed it is one of the scandals of the whole Western educational tradition that women have not been granted equal educational rights until very recently. But that seems a poor ground for denying the term Renaissance to a period which accomplished the rebirth of an intellectual and cultural heritage. It energetically developed that heritage, and passed it on in a form that stimulated further growth.

One representative of this “*bien-pensant*” school is Derek Attridge, who observed with satisfaction that in a recent symposium

The term “Renaissance” [had been] displaced by “Early Modern Europe,” implying a tension between an encomiastic and an objective approach, between a cultural and temporal emphasis, between a Eurocentric and a global perspective, and between a cyclical and a linear view of history. In spite of the parturitive metaphor, “Renaissance” points, with a few notable exceptions, to male achievements within the dominant social and economic class; early modern opens up a much wider, and less immediately glamorous, field. In a variety of modes, and with varying degrees of success, the authors of these essays rewrite the Renaissance as early modern Europe, focusing on the question of sexual difference —or more accurately, assessing the power and strategies of patriarchy during this period and the place of women within and against it. (1987: 810-11)

But these dismissive dichotomies are ideologically motivated, not reflecting actual historical writing. I know of no one at work today whose idea of the Renaissance corresponds to the negative side of this division, being “encomiastic” —that is, involving praise— “glamorous,” “Eurocentric,” “cultural,” and “cyclical.” The favoritism is simply too crude —almost worthy of Plato¹⁸— by which Early Modern is said to be an “objective” term, having a “temporal” emphasis and “a global perspective,” opening up “a linear view of history.” The animus emerges most clearly when the term “Renaissance” is

¹⁷Reviewing Ginzberg (2000) — a work which notably fails to attempt such a rehabilitation.

¹⁸See Vickers (1990).

described as celebrating “male achievements” in the dominant class, using “patriarchy” to keep women down. But Attridge’s tidy dichotomies collapse when put under pressure: while the Renaissance is indeed a “cultural” concept it was also a global culture, for wherever European culture spread, that cultural system re-established itself. One can follow the export of rhetoric to Latin America in the 16th century, and to Russia in the 17th century.¹⁹ The Renaissance is hardly “cyclical,” since although it revived classical culture it was forced to re-interpret it to fit a quite different series of political and social contexts. It is certainly temporal, for all recent historians concur in noting the often speedy developments within each discipline, and by contrast, their slow dissemination throughout Europe north of the Alps. Rather than the naive social model favoured by some feminists, with all the power going to the men, all the suffering to the women, the fact is that a majority of both sexes lived lives of dependence in a survival struggle at the mercy of bad weather, epidemics, and war. While some men had favoured lives, so did some women, who often outlived their husbands and achieved considerable independence outside or beyond marriage. The great strength of Renaissance studies over the last 50 years, surely, has been its breadth, both vertically, within societies, and laterally, across the inhabited world. Social history, economic history, medical history, to name but three, have pursued with an open-minded curiosity all aspects of existence, far beyond elites. Of course, women were underprivileged then, as now, but neither Renaissance nor modern scholars have been unaware of that.

This fashionable dissatisfaction with the term Renaissance, however poorly argued, continues to find expression. *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, after 25 years’ existence under that name, recently removed *Renaissance* from its title, replacing it with *Early Modern*. According to the new editors, the journal has been

redefined in recognition of the broad intellectual shifts that have occurred in the academy over the last decade. In particular, some versions of poststructuralism and postmodernity especially favored in the United States offer considerable resistance to history. Theoretical inquiries and a wide range of political initiative have transformed the context in which we work.

Well, I am tempted to say, if “some versions of poststructuralism and postmodernism... offer considerable resistance to history,” then it is up to the rest of us to advocate the cause of history even harder, until that resistance collapses! And as for the politicization of American universities, many American scholars have testified to its disastrous effects. To name only one diagnosis, John Ellis (1997) has painted an extraordinarily bleak picture. To any

¹⁹See, e. g., Murphy ed. (1983); Spanish translation by Garrote Bernal *et al.* (1999).

upbeat descriptions of these “broad intellectual shifts” we must reply that change is not always for the good.

The larger issue is whether discussions of the past which are driven by modern Theory and modern political attitudes —largely adversarial, iconoclastic— can ever achieve that kind of projection of the imagination into a remote age which Francis Bacon described, with its goal of bringing the mind “into sympathy with antiquity.” Some writers in these schools manage to do so; others merely project present discontents onto the past in order to create an echo which will endorse their own value-system.

These are larger issues than I can deal with here. But any attempt to erode the idea of the Renaissance altogether simply removes a period concept which has a considerable explanatory power. In short, if the Renaissance did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. But since it did exist, then one valuable function that the Spanish Society for English Renaissance Studies can perform is to promote the study and understanding of a period which transformed men and women’s perception of the world they lived in, and the possibilities it offered.

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