

**FROM DAWN TO
DECADENCE**

500 Years of Western
Cultural Life

1500 to the Present

JACQUES BARZUN



HarperCollins *Publishers*

Contents

AUTHOR'S NOTE • ix

PROLOGUE:

**From Current Concerns
to the Subject of This Book • xiii**

PART I:

**From Luther's Ninety-five Theses
to Boyle's "Invisible College" • 1**

PART II:

**From the Bog and Sand of Versailles
to the Tennis Court • 237**

PART III:

**From Faust, Part I, to the
"Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2" • 463**

PART IV:

**From "The Great Illusion"
to "Western Civ Has Got to Go" • 681**

Reference Notes • 803

Index of Persons • 829

Index of Subjects • 853

Author's Note

IT TAKES ONLY a look at the numbers to see that the 20th century is coming to an end. A wider and deeper scrutiny is needed to see that in the West the culture of the last 500 years is ending at the same time. Believing this to be true, I have thought it the right moment to review in sequence the great achievements and the sorry failures of our half millennium.

This undertaking has also given me a chance to describe at first hand for any interested posterity some aspects of present decadence that may have escaped notice, and to show how they relate to others generally acknowledged. But the lively and positive predominate: this book is for people who like to read about art and thought, manners, morals, and religion, and the social setting in which these activities have been and are taking place. I have assumed that such readers prefer discourse to be selective and critical rather than neutral and encyclopedic. And guessing further at their preference, I have tried to write as I might speak, with only a touch of pedantry here and there to show that I understand modern tastes.

Because the plan of the work is new, and thus unlike that of excellent histories that might be named, special care has been given to the ordering of the parts. Linking is particularly important in cultural history, because culture is a web of many strands; none is spun by itself, nor is any cut off at a fixed date like wars and regimes. Events that are commonly said to mark novelty in thought or change of direction in culture are but emphatic signposts, not boundary walls. I punctuate the course of my narrative with events of that kind, but the divisions do not hang upon them. Rather, the chapter divisions suggested themselves after rethinking the given past to find in it the clearest patterns. They are framed by the four great revolutions—the religious, monarchical, liberal, and social roughly a hundred years apart—whose aims and passions still govern our minds and behavior.

During the writing of this book I was frequently asked by friends and colleagues how long its preparation had taken. I could only answer: a lifetime. My studies of separate periods and figures, which began in the late 1920s, disclosed unexpected vistas and led to conclusions at variance with a number of accepted judgments. After further study and a review of what I had published, it seemed possible to shape my findings into a continuous tale. In it, as will appear, figures worth knowing emerge from obscurity and new features appear in others. Familiar ideas are reassessed, particularly the notions in vogue today as to where in the past our present merits and troubles come from.

I do not expect the reader to be steadily grateful. Nobody likes to hear a rooted opinion challenged, and even less to see good reasons offered for a principle or policy once in force and now universally condemned—for example, the divine right of kings or religious persecution. Our age is so tolerant, so broad-minded and disinclined to violence in its ideologies, that to find a case made out for the temper of the 16th or 17th century is bound to affront the righteous. Yet without exposure to this annoyance, one's understanding of our modern thoughts and virtues is incomplete.

Not that I am in favor of royal masters or persecution or any other evil supposedly outgrown. I cite these examples as a hint that I have not consulted current prejudices. My own are enough to keep me busy as I aim at the historian's detachment and sympathy. For if, as Ranke said, every period stands justified in the sight of God, it deserves at least sympathy in the sight of Man.*

Claiming detachment need not raise the issue of objectivity. It is waste of breath to point out that every observer is in some way biased. It does not follow that bias cannot be guarded against, that all biases distort equally, or that controlled bias remains as bad as propaganda. In dealing with the arts, for example, it is being "objective" to detect one's blind spots—step one in detachment. The second is to refrain from downgrading what one does not respond to. One has then the duty to report the informed judgment of others.

Since some events and figures in our lengthy past strike me as different from what they have seemed before, I must occasionally speak in my own name and give reasons to justify the heresy. I can only hope that this accountability will not tempt some reviewers to label the work "a very personal book." I would ask them, What book worth reading is not? If Henry Adams were the echo of Gibbon, we would not greatly value the pastiche.

On this point of personality, William James concluded after reflection that philosophers do not give us transcripts but visions of the world. Similarly, historians give visions of the past. The good ones are not merely

* "Man" is used throughout in the sense of human being(s) of either sex, except when the context makes it clear that the secondary sense of male is intended. The scholarly reasons that warrant adhering to this literary usage are set out on pages 82-85.

plausible; they rest on a solid base of facts that nobody disputes. There is nothing personal about facts, but there is about choosing and grouping them. It is by the patterning and the meanings ascribed that the vision is conveyed. And this, if anything, is what each historian adds to the general understanding. Read more than one historian and the chances are good that you will come closer and closer to the full complexity. Whoever wants an absolute copy of what happened must gain access to the mind of God.

Speaking of meanings, I must say a word about the devices and symbols used in the text; and first about the role of the quotations in the margins. They are meant to supply the “real self and voice” of the persons in the drama. In form, these extracts resemble the familiar “pull-outs” in magazines—sentences lifted out of the article to lure the reader. In this book they are not pull-outs but “add-ins.” Their insertion without preamble helps to shorten the text by dispensing with the usual: “As Erasmus wrote to Henry VIII, . . .” “As Mark Twain said about Joan of Arc, . . .”; after which, more words are needed to sew up the cut. This small innovation also permits juxtaposition for contrast or emphasis. By the end, the reader may find that he has been treated to an anthology of choice morsels.

Likewise for brevity, I use the formula 16C, 19C, and so on for the quick recognition of centuries. The indications *early*, *mid*, or *late* next to these specify times more closely. There are as few multi-digit dates as possible, because persons, works, and events do not modify culture the moment they enter it. Readers who wish precise limits to the lives of culture-makers will find the birth-and-death dates opposite the names in the Index of Persons.

Another device that calls for comment is my use of THEMES, that is, ideas or purposes that I find recurring throughout the era. The ideas are expressed, the purposes are implied in the event or tendency I describe. I shall say more about the nature and scope of themes on a later page.

As an additional help to seeing wholes, the mark (<) or (>) with a number attached directs the reader to a page where the topic is carried forward or has been introduced. For further light from other minds, I insert from time to time: “The book to read is . . .” such and such. These are almost always short books. When the phrase is: “The book to browse in is . . .” it indicates a longer work which is worth sampling. These referrals seem to me more likely to be serviceable than the usual list of titles at the back “for further reading.” A good many of these books are not of recent date, which does not make them any less informative and pleasant to read. It is a false analogy with science that makes one think latest is best. No footnotes will be found except the one above. Source references (when needed) are in the backnotes, marked (°) in the text.

Although in the usual author-fashion I speak possessively of what this book contains, it is in truth the product of a vast collaboration. When I think of all that I have garnered from other minds in my extended sojourn, of what I owe to reading, to my teachers, to conversation with students, colleagues, friends, and strangers; to travel, to the artists who have exercised my wits and delighted my soul since infancy, I am overwhelmed by the size of the debt. To list the names of these helpers would amount to a directory, but again and again as I wrote I vividly recalled my obligation.

Chance has also aided the enterprise: family, time, and place of birth gave shape and direction to effort; insomnia and longevity—sheer accidents—helped to crystallize fleeting insights by obsessive recurrence. A student of cultural history is the last person who can believe he is self-made or the sole begetter of his most original idea. To quote from William James: “Every thought and act owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers.” He addressed this reminder to himself; it defines both the situation of the candid author and the principle of a work of history.

PROLOGUE

From Current Concerns to the Subject of This Book

LOOKING AT the phrase “our past” or “our culture” the reader is entitled to ask: “Who is *we*?” That is for each person to decide. It is a sign of present disarray that nobody can tell which individuals or groups see themselves as part of the evolution described in these pages.

This state of affairs has its source in that very evolution. Our culture is in that recurrent phase when, for good reasons, many feel the urge to build a wall against the past. It is a revulsion from things in the present that seem a curse from our forebears. Others attack or ignore selected periods. In this latter mood, national, religious, or cultural ancestry becomes a matter of choice; people who feel the need “dig for roots” wherever they fancy. The storehouse of traditions and creeds offers an over-abundance, because the culture is old and unraveling.

This passion to break away explains also why many feel that the West has to be denounced. But we are not told what should or could replace it as a whole. Anyhow, the notion of western culture as a solid block having but one meaning is contrary to fact. The West has been an endless series of opposites—in religion, politics, art, morals, and manners, most of them persistent beyond their time of first conflict. To denounce does not free the self from what it hates, any more than ignoring the past shuts off its influence. Look at the youth walking the street with ears plugged to a portable radio: he is tied to the lives of Marconi and of the composer being broadcast. The museum visitor gazing at a Rembrandt is getting a message from the 17C. And the ardent follower of Martin Luther King might well pause over his leader’s given names, which evoke ideas from the Protestant Reformation and link the 20C to the 16th.

On the workaday plane, anyone receiving some form of social security here or abroad is the beneficiary of a long line of theorists and activists along which are found such disparates as Florence Nightingale, the Comte de Saint-Simon, Bismarck, and Bernard Shaw. The political refugee who finds his host nation evidently more congenial than the one he fled from can now breathe

freely thanks to the heroic efforts of thousands of thinkers and doers, famous or obscure, martyrs or ordinary folk, embattled in the cause of political freedom—though often enemies when so engaged.

If the new-minted citizen then turns critic of his adopted country, attacking policies and politicians with impunity, he enjoys this privileged pastime because of the likes of Voltaire, who also had to skip across frontiers to escape persecution and keep dissenting. Even the terrorist who drives a car filled with dynamite toward a building in some hated nation is part of what he would destroy: his weapon is the work of Alfred Nobel and the inventors of the internal combustion engine. His very cause has been argued for him by such proponents of national self-determination as President Wilson and such rationalizers of violence as Georges Sorel and Bakunin, the Russian anarchist.

Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us. Individuals show the way, set the patterns. The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world.

—WILLIAM JAMES (1908)

To see these connections is also to see that the fruits of western culture—human rights, social benefits, machinery—have not sprouted out of the ground like weeds; they are the work of innumerable hands and heads.

I have cited famous names, but they had predecessors now forgotten, and then followers who harped on one idea until it was made actual at last by the consent of the multitude. The enduring force of these deeds is what is meant by the living past; they form the substance of what is now called “the culture.”

Culture—what a word! Up to a few years ago it meant two or three related things easy to grasp and keep apart. Now it is a piece of all-purpose jargon that covers a hodge-podge of overlapping things. People speak and write about the culture of almost any segment of society: the counterculture, to begin with, and the many subcultures: ethnic cultures, corporate cultures, teenage culture, and popular culture. An editorial in *The New York Times* discusses the culture of the city’s police department,^o and an article in the travel section distinguishes the culture of plane travel from the bus culture.^o On a par with these, recall the split between the “two cultures” of science and the humanities, which is to be deplored—like the man-and-wife “culture clash,” which causes divorce. Artists feel the lure—no, the duty—of joining an adversary culture; for the artist is by nature “the enemy of his culture,” just as he is (on another page of the same journal) “a product of his culture.” In education, the latest fad is multiculturalism, and in entertainment the highest praise goes to a “cross-cultural event.” On the world scene, the experts warn of the culture wars that are brewing.^o

At the bottom of the pile, “culture,” meaning the well-furnished mind, barely survives. Four thousand cultural facts in dictionary form have recently been laid on the coffee table,^o but it may be doubted whether this bonanza

will by itself cultivate the fallow mind, lift it out of day-to-day interests, and scrape it free of provincialism. A wise man has said: "Culture is what is left after you have forgotten all you have definitely set out to learn." How did culture in this sense—a simple metaphor from agri-culture—lose its authority and get burdened with meanings for which there were other good words? These mini-cultures created on the spur of the moment are obviously fictitious. But again, they express the separatism already mentioned. It arises from too much jostling with too many people—nothing but constraint at every turn, because the stranger, the machine, the bureaucrat's rule impose their will. Hence the desire to huddle in small groups whose ways are congenial.

The hope of relief is utopian; for these small groups are not independent. Their "culture" consists only of local customs and traditions, individual or institutional habits, class manners and prejudices, language or dialect, upbringing or profession, creed, attitudes, usages, fashions, and superstitions; or, at the narrowest, temperament. If a word is wanted for the various pairings of such elements, there is *ethos*. The press—not to say the media—with their love of new terms from the Greek, could quickly make it commonplace.

*
* *
*

But what are the contents of the overarching culture? By tracing in broad outline the evolution of art, science, religion, philosophy, and social thought during the last 500 years, I hope to show that during this span the peoples of the West offered the world a set of ideas and institutions not found earlier or elsewhere. As already remarked, it has been a unity combined with enormous diversity. Borrowing widely from other lands, thriving on dissent and originality, the West has been the mongrel civilization par excellence. But in spite of patchwork and conflict it has pursued characteristic purposes—that is its unity—and now these purposes, carried out to their utmost possibility, are bringing about its demise. This ending is shown by the deadlocks of our time: for and against nationalism, for and against individualism, for and against the high arts, for and against strict morals and religious belief.

The now full-blown individual wields a panoply of rights, including the right to do "his own thing" without hindrance from authority. And any right is owed to all that lives: illegal immigrants, school children, criminals, babies, plants, and animals. This universal independence, achieved after many battles, is a distinctive feature of the West. EMANCIPATION is one of the cultural themes of the era, perhaps the most characteristic of all. And of course it requires more and more limitations in order to prevent my right from infringing yours.

A parallel theme is PRIMITIVISM. The longing to shuffle off the complex arrangements of an advanced culture recurs again and again. It is a main motive of the Protestant Reformation, it reappears as the cult of the Noble

Savage, long before Rousseau, its supposed inventor. The savage with his simple creed is healthy, highly moral, and serene, a worthier being than the civilized man, who must intrigue and deceive to prosper. The late 18C returns to this utopian hope; the late 19C voices it in Edward Carpenter's *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure*; and the 1960s of the 20C experience it in the revolt of the young, who seek the simple life in communes, or who as "Flower People" are convinced that love is an all-sufficient social bond.

Our five centuries present some ten or twelve such themes. They are not historical "forces" or "causes," but names for the desires, attitudes, purposes behind the events or movements, some embodied in lasting institutions. Pointing out this thematic unity and continuity is not to propose a new philosophy of history in the tradition of Marx, Spengler, or Toynbee. They saw history as moved by a single force toward a single goal. I remain an historian, that is, a storyteller who tries to unfold the intricate plot woven by the actions of men, women, and teenagers (these last must not be forgotten), whose desires are the motive power of history. Material conditions interfere, results are unexpected, and there can be no single outcome.

The story accordingly deals not only with events and tendencies but also with personalities. The recital is studded with pen portraits—some of the presumably well-known, but more often of others too often overlooked. We meet of course Luther and Leonardo, Rabelais and Rubens, but also Marguerite of Navarre, Marie de Gournay, Christina of Sweden, and their peers down the ages. They appear as persons, not merely as actors, for history is above all concrete and particular, not general and abstract. It is for convenient remembering only that in the retelling of many facts the historian offers generalities and gives names to "periods" and "themes." The stuff itself is the thoughts and deeds of once living beings.

But why should the story come to an end? It doesn't, of course, in the literal sense of stoppage or total ruin. All that is meant by Decadence is "falling off." It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary, it is a very active time, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility. The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. Boredom and fatigue are great historical forces.

It will be asked, how does the historian know when Decadence sets in? By the open confessions of malaise, by the search in all directions for a new faith or faiths. Dozens of cults have latterly arisen in the Christian West: Buddhism, Islam, Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Dr. Moon's Unification Church, and a large collection of others, some dedicated to group suicide. To secular minds, the old ideals look outworn or hopeless and practical aims are

made into creeds sustained by violent acts: fighting nuclear power, global warming, and abortion; saving from use the environment with its fauna and flora (“Bring back the wolf!”); promoting organic against processed foods, and proclaiming disaffection from science and technology. The impulse to PRIMITIVISM animates all these negatives.

Such causes serve to concentrate the desire for action in a stalled society; for in every town, county, or nation, it is seen that most of what government sets out to do for the public good is resisted as soon as proposed. Not two, but three or four groups, organized or impromptu, are ready with contrary reasons as sensible as those behind the project. The upshot is a floating hostility to things as they are. It inspires the repeated use of the dismissive prefixes *anti-* and *post-* (*anti-art*, *post-modernism*) and the promise to *reinvent* this or that institution. The hope is that getting rid of what is will by itself generate the new life.

*
* * *

Granted for the sake of argument that “our culture” may be ending, why the slice of 500 years? What makes it a unity? The starting date 1500 follows usage: textbooks from time immemorial have called it the beginning of the Modern Era. Good reasons for so doing will be found on nearly every page of the first half-dozen chapters. The reader will note in passing that *era* is used here to mean stretches of 500 years or more—time enough for an evolving culture to work out its possibilities; *period* or *age* denotes the shorter distinctive spans within an era.

Strictness on this point helps to clear up the confusion by which “modern” has been made to cover both the era since the Middle Ages and the ill-defined periods when “modernism” is said to begin—in 1880 or 1900 or 1920 (>713). The divisions within the modern era will be seen to differ from those in college texts, whose subject is general history. The cultural perspective requires a different patterning. Three spans, each of approximately 125 years, take us, roughly speaking, from Luther to Newton, from Louis XIV to the guillotine, and from Goethe to the New York Armory Show. The fourth and last span deals with the rest of our century.

If this periodizing had to be justified, it could be said that the first period—1500–1660—was dominated by the issue of what to believe in religion; the second—1661–1789—by what to do about the status of the individual and the mode of government; the third—1790–1920—by what means to achieve social and economic equality. The rest is the mixed consequence of all these efforts.

What then marks a new age? The appearance or disappearance of particular embodiments of a given purpose. Look out of the window: where is the town crier?° where are the idlers watching the bear-baiting or laughing at the gates of Bedlam, the madhouse? Again, does anyone now use “noble” to

praise a person or, like Ruskin, to classify types of art? Turn to the dedication of a new book: why are there not three or four pages of convoluted flattery addressed to a lord? Each of these items now lacking is the token of a change in: technology, moral attitudes, social hierarchy, and the support of literature.

With such things in mind, newspapers are fond of referring to the “dustbin of history,” a notion they borrow not from Karl Marx, as they think, but from an English writer and member of Parliament, Augustine Birrell.^o On inspection the bin is much less full than is commonly believed. The repeats and returns in the last five centuries have been frequent. To cite an example, one need only note the present resurgence of intellectual interest in the text of the Bible and the life of Jesus. Or consider another survival that could qualify for the dustbin but has been overlooked: the newspaper column on astrology. The rivalry of patterns rarely ends in a complete victory; the defeated survive and keep fighting; there is a perpetual counterpoint.

Having said all this on the strength of the western experience—its reckless inclusion of peoples, outreach for exotic novelties, endless internal conflict of leading philosophies, repeated changes deep enough to produce distinct ages—it may seem contradictory to speak of one culture flourishing from end to end of our half millennium. There is in fact no inconsistency. Unity does not mean uniformity, and identity is compatible with change. Nobody doubts the unity of the person from babyhood to old age. Again, in a civil war, though all political and social bonds are broken, the cultural web is tough and it still links the two sides together. Both speak the same language, fight over one set of issues, and remember a common past, full of wrongs for one side, seen as rights by the other. Both live at the same level of civilization. Family, type of government, moral standards remain alike in both. Both use the same weapons, lead their armies in similar fashion, wear the same sort of uniform, and in naming ranks and carrying flags show that the practice has but a common meaning.

One last question: do ideas really exert force? Skepticism about their influence in history has always appealed to certain temperaments. Says the skeptic: “Art and thought should be kept in their proper place. Elizabeth I did more to shape the everyday life of a modern Englishman than Shakespeare.”^o With a firmer grasp on his example, the critic might have seen that one of Elizabeth’s chief troubles was how to cope with the threat of ideas, those of her newly Protestant subjects, embattled against their Catholic compatriots, also acting on ideas.

Again, if the last five centuries present the spectacle of a single culture, it is also because of the tenacious memory, aided by the practice of obsessive record-keeping. Our distinctive attitude toward history, our habit of arguing from it, turns events into ideas charged with power. And this use of the past dates precisely from the years that usher in what is called modern times.

PART I

From Luther's Ninety-five Theses to Boyle's "Invisible College"

The West Torn Apart

The New Life

The Good Letters

The "Artist" Is Born

CROSS SECTION:

The View from Madrid Around 1540

The Eutopians

Epic & Comic, Lyric & Music, Critic & Public

CROSS SECTION:

The View from Venice Around 1650

The Invisible College

The West Torn Apart

THE MODERN ERA BEGINS, characteristically, with a revolution. It is commonly called the Protestant Reformation, but the train of events starting early in the 16C and ending—if indeed it has ended—more than a century later has all the features of a revolution. I take these to be: the violent transfer of power and property in the name of an idea.

We have got into the habit of calling too many things revolutions. Given a new device or practice that changes our homely habits, we exclaim: “revolutionary!” But revolutions change more than personal habits or a widespread practice. They give culture a new face. Between the great upheaval of the 1500s and the present, only three later ones are of the same order. True, the history books give the name to a dozen or more such violent events, but in these uprisings it was only the violence that was great. They were but local aftershocks of one or other of the four main quakes: the 16C religious revolution; the 17C monarchical revolution; the liberal, individualist “French” revolution that straddles the 18th and 19th; and the 20C “Russian,” social and collectivist.

The quotation marks around French and Russian are meant to show that those names are only conventional. The whole western world was brooding over the Idea of each before it exploded into war, and the usual dates 1789 and 1917 mark only the trigger incidents. It took decades for the four to work out their first intention and side effects—and their ruling ideas have not ceased to act.

One must speak of *the West* as being torn apart in the 16C because *Europe* would be inexact. Europe is the peninsula that juts out from the great mass of Asia without a break and is ridiculously called a continent. In the 16C revolution only the westernmost part of that peninsula was affected: from Germany, Poland, Austria, and Italy to the Atlantic Ocean. The Balkans belonged to the Moslem Turks and Russia was Orthodox Christian, not Catholic. For the West, in this clearly defined sense, it would be convenient to say “the Occident.”

To call the first of the four revolutions religious is also inadequate. It did indeed cause millions to change the forms of their worship and the conception of their destiny. But it did much besides. It posed the issue of diversity of opinion as well as of faith. It fostered new feelings of nationhood. It raised the status of the vernacular languages. It changed attitudes toward work, art, and human failings. It deprived the West of its ancestral sense of unity and common descent. Lastly but less immediately, by emigration to the new world overseas, it brought an extraordinary enlargement of the meaning of West and the power of its civilization.

*
* *
*

When the miner's son from Saxony, Luther, Lhuder, Lutter, or Lotharius as he was variously known, posted his 95 propositions on the door of All Saints' church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, the last thing he wanted to do was to break up his church, the Catholic (= "universal"), and divide his world into warring camps.

Nor was he performing an unusual act. He was a monk and professor of theology at the newly founded university of Wittenberg (where Hamlet later studied), and it was common practice for clerics to start a debate in this fashion. The equivalent today would be to publish a provocative article in a learned journal. A German scholar has recently argued that Luther never posted his theses. Whether he did or not, they circulated quickly; he had made copies and sent them to friends, who recopied and passed them on. Soon, Luther had the uneasy surprise of receiving them back from South Germany, *printed*.

This little fact is telling. Luther's hope of reform might have foundered like many others of the previous 200 years, had it not been for the invention of printing. Gutenberg's movable type, already in use for some 40 years, was the physical instrument that tore the West asunder. But one point about the new *techne*° is worth noting: the printing press by itself was not enough: better paper, a modified ink, and a body of experienced craftsmen were also needed to make type a power. Pamphlets could now be produced quickly, accurately, in quantity, and, compared to manuscript copies, cheaply.

Many of the Protestant tracts were illustrated with woodcuts, by Cranach, Dürer, and other leading artists, which helped propaganda by attracting the illiterate: their friends read them the text. No longer always in Latin for clerics only, but in one of the common tongues, the 16C literature of biblical argument and foul invective began what we now call the popularization of ideas through the first of the mass media.

Some notion of the force wielded by this new artifact, "the book," may be gathered from the estimate that by the first year of the 16C, 40,000 sepa-

rate editions of all kinds of works had been issued—roughly nine million volumes from more than a hundred presses. During the Protestant struggle some towns had half a dozen firms working day and night, their messengers leaving every few hours with batches of sheets under their cloaks, the ink hardly dry, for delivery to safe distributors—the first underground press. [The book to browse in is: *The Coming of the Book* by Lucien Febvre and Jean Martin.]

If Luther had no thought of setting off a revolution, what was his aim? He “only wanted to elicit the truth about the sacrament of penance.” An innocent question, but timely, because of the current sale of “indulgences.” These were a sort of certified check drawn by the pope on the “treasury of merit accumulated by the saints.” In popular belief, buying one enabled the holder to finesse penance and shorten his or her time in Purgatory—or that of a friend or relative. Luther wanted to know whether any substitute for true remorse and active penance could be bought in the open market. He thought the only treasure of the church was the gospel.

Many besides Luther had felt true piety and wanted to worship sincerely, not buy their way into heaven. One form of awakened faith was significantly called *devotio moderna*. The formation of groups like the Brothers of the Common Life, the founding of new grammar schools, works such as *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, and the spontaneous attitude of ordinary folk showed that the work of earlier reformers was bearing fruit.

These reformers had been many. From Wycliff in 14th-century England to John Huss in Bohemia in the 15th, heroic attempts had been made to “go back to the primitive church,” the humble early Christians, whose only church was their elected overseers. For them the gospel had been enough—and so it should still be.

Even before Wycliff, who was later called “The Morning Star of the Reformation,” a whole region around the southern French town of Albi had in the 13C achieved this simplification. The Albigenses were exterminated. Later movers of heresy were burned at

An indulgence can never remit guilt; the Pope himself cannot do such a thing; God has kept that in His own hand.

It can have no efficacy for souls in Purgatory; penalties imposed by the church can only refer to the living. What the Pope can do for souls in Purgatory is by prayer.

The Christian who has true repentance has already received pardon from God, altogether apart from an indulgence, and so does not need one.

—FROM LUTHER’S “NINETY-FIVE THESES”

**So many pointed caps
Laced with double flaps
And so many felted hats
Saw I never.**

**So many good lessons,
So many good sermons,
And so few devotions,
Saw I never.**

—JOHN SKELTON (C. 1500)

the stake. Within the church hierarchy itself, repeated demands had been heard for “reform of the head and members”; but institutional self-reform is rare; the conscience is willing, but the culture is tough.

In this setting, Luther’s downright assertions proved explosive. He had sent the text to the Archbishop of Mainz, a gross and greedy young man who could not help taking an interest, since he was to get one-third of the proceeds of this indulgence sale as reimbursement for the cost of the bishopric he had just bought. Getting no reply, Luther sent another copy to the pope and pursued his meditations.

Now 34 years old, he was not a young hothead. For seven years he had lived in anguish, often in despair, about the state of his soul. He had fought the urgings of the flesh—not only desire but also hatred and envy—and he had always lost the battle. How could he hope to be saved? Then one day, when a brother monk was reciting the Creed, the words “I believe in the forgiveness of sins” struck him as a revelation. “I felt as if I were born anew.” Faith had suddenly descended into him without his doing anything to deserve it. His divided self or “sick soul,” as William James called the typical state, was mysteriously healed. The mystery was God’s bestowal of grace. Lacking it, the sinner cannot have faith and walk in the path of salvation. Such is the substance not merely of the Protestant idea, but of the Protestant experience.

Seeing how thick and fast the response came when Luther proclaimed his discovery, it is plain that fellow sufferers could be numbered by the thousand. Sensitive souls could be found among poor peasants at the plow, stolid merchants in the free cities, ambitious princes, impoverished knights in their crumbling castles, and sincere priests at the altar. To the pope, who at the time was the esthetic voluptuary Leo X, Luther’s outburst was just another little monk’s showing off his learning. The document was handed over to clerical bureaucrats who took three years to pick out the heresies.

But Luther was not waiting. His revelation of grace, coupled with the memory of his visit to Rome half a dozen years earlier as an envoy of his order, brought him to another simplifying idea: every man is a priest. He is far from being “another Christ,” as the Catholic ordination of priests puts it, but he does not need the Roman hierarchy as middleman; he has direct access to God. That top-heavy apparatus, a burden throughout the West, is useless. To make the proposition absolute, Luther added the principle he called Christian liberty: “A Christian man is a perfectly free lord, subject to none.”

This proclamation—every man a priest, a free lord, and no church—broadcast to the Germans in German, could only mean a new way of life. But Luther had no mind to manufacture anarchists and he stated the counterpart of the claim to liberty: “A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all”; that is, to the secular society ruled by princes.

This reassured the lay authorities and marked out Luther’s course. Side-

stepping quite unconsciously the dangerous role of religious prophet, he was taking on the popular role of anti-clerical. It rallies many interests. Pope-bashing had long been a high-toned enterprise, doubling as a form of blackmail. By it, kings got political concessions; others, cardinal's hats. It had done nothing to reform the church, which, many agreed, must be rid of abuses, but everyone stood firm—yes, but not *my* privileges.

The incipient revolution had defined the enemy: not the Catholic religion and its faithful, but the pontiff, his employees, and their hocus-pocus, that is, the trappings of worship. When the pope's bull condemning 41 of the 95 theses arrived in Wittenberg, it gave Luther an opportunity for a demonstration: he burned it publicly, to the great delight, naturally, of the university students crowding around him. For good measure he threw in some rescripts, the decretals of Clement VI, the *Summa Angelica*, and a few books by a colleague who championed the pope, Johann von Eck. "It is an old custom," said Luther, "to burn bad books."

*
* *

How a revolution erupts from a commonplace event—tidal wave from a ripple—is cause for endless astonishment. Neither Luther in 1517 nor the men who gathered at Versailles in 1789 intended at first what they produced at last. Even less did the Russian Liberals who made the revolution of 1917 foresee what followed. All were as ignorant as everybody else of how much was about to be destroyed. Nor could they guess what feverish feelings, what strange behavior ensue when revolution, great or short-lived, is in the air.

First, a piece of news about something said or done travels quickly, more so than usual, because it is uniquely apt; it fits a half-conscious mood or caps a situation: a monk questions indulgences, and he does it not just out of the blue—they are being sold again on a large scale. The fact and the challenger's name generate rumor, exaggeration, misunderstanding, falsehood. People ask each other what is true and what it means. The atmosphere becomes electric, the sense of time changes, grows rapid; a vague future seems nearer.

On impulse, perhaps to snap the tension, somebody shouts in church, throws a stone through a window, which provokes a fight—it happened so at Wittenberg—and clearly it is no ordinary breach of the peace. Another unknown harangues a crowd, urging it to stay calm—or not to stand there gaping but *do* something. As further news spreads, various types of people become aroused for or against the thing now upsetting everybody's daily life. But what is that thing? Concretely: ardent youths full of hope as they catch the drift of the idea, rowdies looking for fun, and characters with a grudge. Cranks and tolerated lunatics come out of houses, criminals out of hideouts, and all assert themselves.

Manners are flouted and customs broken. Foul language and direct insult become normal, in keeping with the rest of the excitement, buildings defaced, images destroyed, shops looted. Printed sheets pass from hand to hand and are read with delight or outrage—Listen to this! Angry debates multiply about things long since settled: talk of free love, of priests marrying and monks breaking their vows, of property and wives in common, of sweeping out all evils, all corruption, all at once—all things new for a blissful life on earth.

**Immortal God! What a century do I see
beginning!**

If only it were possible to be young again!

—ERASMUS TO GUILLAUME BUDÉ (1517)

**Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.**

—WORDSWORTH REMEMBERING THE
FRENCH REVOLUTION (1805)

A curious leveling takes place: the common people learn words and ideas hitherto not familiar and not interesting and discuss them like intellectuals, while others neglect their usual concerns—art, philosophy, scholarship—because there is only one compelling topic, the revolutionary Idea. The well-to-do and the “right-thinking,” full of fear, come together to defend their possessions and habits. But counsels

are divided and many see their young “taking the wrong side.” The powers that be wonder and keep watch, with fleeting thoughts of advantage to be had from the confusion. Leaders of opinion try to put together some of the ideas afloat into a position which they mean to fight for. They will reassure others, or preach boldness, and anyhow head the movement.

Voices grow shrill, parties form and adopt names or are tagged with them in derision and contempt. Again and again comes the shock of broken friendships, broken families. As time goes on, “betraying the cause” is an incessant charge, and there are indeed turncoats. Authorities are bewildered, heads of institutions try threats and concessions by turns, hoping the surge of subversion will collapse like previous ones. But none of this holds back that transfer of power and property which is the mark of revolution and which in the end establishes the Idea.

The seizure by Henry VIII of England’s abbeys and priories, openly in the name of reform and morality, is notorious. But this secularizing of church property went on during the 16C in every other country except Italy and Spain. During this transfer, treaties were made every few years to confirm or reverse the grab, as the fortunes of war dictated. To the distant observer the course of events is a rushing flood; to those inside it is a whirlpool.

Such is, roughly, how revolutions “feel.” The gains and the deeds of blood vary in detail from one time to the next, but the motives are the usual mix: hope, ambition, greed, fear, lust, envy, hatred of order and of art, fanatic fervor, heroic devotion, and love of destruction.

Chance also plays its capricious role. Henry VIII, sincerely convinced that

his marriage to Queen Catherine was incestuous and prevented his begetting a male heir, asked the pope for an annulment at a time when Lutheran ideas were spreading. The king had previously attacked Luther in a learned tract, for which the pope had named Henry “Defender of the Faith.” Now the defender had to break with a pope who dared not grant the divorce, because Emperor Charles V would not hear of it: Catherine was his aunt. Out of this operatic plot came a new church, the Anglican, headed by the king, not a cleric, and forever independent of Rome.

In fact, the king was working for himself, for royal power. His theology was unchanged, but his taking the church lands was a step in the silent march of the next revolution (239>).

*
* * *

One may wonder why Frederick, Elector of Saxony, did not discipline Luther and his followers as the pope requested—a request accompanied by a high honor, the Golden Rose, to make it persuasive. Frederick was Luther’s sovereign as well as his employer, having set up and staffed the University of Wittenberg. And he was a pious Catholic who collected saintly relics; he seems to have owned 8,000, including straw from Jesus’s crib. Yet all his life he kept protecting the monk-professor who burned papal bulls.

In this and other signs of resistance to the pope one detects the feelings of secular rulers against the religious, the antagonism of local authority toward central, and now a heightened sense of German nationhood that fretted at “foreign” demands. For in the conflict with the pope and his Roman hierarchy, the feeling that “those Italians” were interfering in “our affairs” would seem natural to some. Others would also find cause for national pride—though there was really no German nation—in the little tract entitled *Germania*, by the ancient Roman historian Tacitus. He portrayed Rome as decadent and slavish and the German tribes as nobly moral and free. Frederick of Saxony may not have been taken by this doubtful parallel, but in his defense of Luther a private emotion came into play: he was offended that a faculty member of his cherished university should be called to account by Vatican officials.

The pope, still combating heresy, not as yet secession, enlisted the aid of the recently elected emperor, the chivalric teenager Charles V, who agreed to try the Wittenberg trouble-maker at the next imperial congress, the now famous Diet of Worms. The strategy was to alternate threats and entreaty.

**When Love could teach a monarch to be
wise
And Gospel light first dawned from Bullen’s
eyes.**

[Bullen is Anne Boleyn.]

—“ON THE PLEASURES OF VICISSITUDE,”
“ELEGY” GRAY ON HENRY VIII’S
PREDICAMENT

But the defendant's heroic stubbornness on the second day, after a momentary weakening on the first—a touch worthy of the tragic stage—made Frederick fear the worst. He had Luther kidnaped and hidden in a castle that is now a tourist attraction, the Wartburg.

Luther's life and the fate of his doctrine everywhere thus depended on the secular arm being exerted in support, and in many places at once. A revolutionary idea succeeds only if it can rally strong “irrelevant” interests, and only the military can make it safe.

At the Wartburg, despite the rude noises that the Devil kept making to thwart him, Luther translated the New Testament into German, choosing the dialect most likely to reach the greatest number.^o The gospels, if read by everybody, would prove him right. Hence the name of Evangelicals. It preceded and long prevailed over the accidental name of Protestants, which arose when some delegates protested against a tentative agreement with the Catholic partisans.

From his unexpected sabbatical onward, Luther kept addressing the Germans on every issue of religious, moral, political, and social importance. Pamphlets, books, letters to individuals that were “given to the press” by the recipients, biblical commentaries, sermons, and hymns kept streaming from his inkwell. Disciples made Latin translations of what was in German and vice versa. It was an unexampled barrage of propaganda to pose a country-wide issue. Opponents retorted, confrontations were staged at universities and written up. A torrent of black-on-white wordage about the true faith and the good society poured over Christian heads. It did not cease for 350 years: 1900 was the first year in which religious works (at least in England) did not outnumber all other publications.

The late 20C has resumed the battle. Fundamentalism is Luther's Biblicism in a new phase (>40; 261), and throughout the West, sects multiply as they did 450 years ago—there are 172 such groups registered in France alone, most of them Christian. And the results of this renewed search for faith are the same now as then. The modern stirrings are of course less root-and-branch efforts than those of the 16C. They demanded a full-scale return to the conditions of the early church, sounding the theme of PRIMITIVISM—Back to the basics! When people feel that accretions and complications have buried the original purpose of an institution, when all arguments for reform have been heard and have failed, the most thoughtful and active decide that they want to be “cured of civilization.” Needless to add, Luther's “Christian liberty” was also the first blast heralding that highly conspicuous theme of the modern era, EMANCIPATION.

What were in fact the things in the church's "head and members" that people wanted to be rid of? First, the familiar "corruptions"—gluttonous monks in affluent abbeys, absentee bishops, priests with concubines, and so on. But moral turpitude concealed a deeper trouble: the meaning of the roles had been lost. The priest, instead of being a teacher, was ignorant; the monk, instead of helping to save the world by his piety, was an idle profiteer; the bishop, instead of supervising the care of souls in his diocese was a politician and businessman. One of them here or there might be pious and a scholar—he showed that goodness was not impossible. But too often the bishop was a boy of twelve, his influential family having provided early for his future happiness. The system was rotten. This had been said over and over; yet the old hulk was immovable. When people accept futility and the absurd as normal, the culture is decadent. The term is not a slur; it is a technical label. A decadent culture offers opportunities chiefly to the satirist, and the turn of the 15C had a good many, one of them a great one:

Erasmus

The well-known portrait by Dürer shows him with eyelids modestly, thoughtfully down, the face smooth-featured and serene. Later portraits—in words—often make him out a cautious, middle-of-the-road academic character who, in the battle of his time, took the line of compromise. Luther was the strong man, Erasmus the intellectual; therefore the good that came out of rebellion we owe to the strong man.

No summary could be falser. Erasmus was a courageous, independent fighter, as easily roused to anger—if anger is a revolutionary virtue—as Luther himself. He was impetuous in pushing his cause well before Luther thought of having one. Erasmus was the greater scholar, had more wit, and a different kind of literary genius. From his earliest days he denounced the monks, discredited the saints, and declared "almost all Christians wretchedly enslaved by blindness and ignorance."

He was himself a monk, made into one against his will by his guardian; for though not abandoned by his father, he was illegitimate, and had been trapped into his vows. He had no thought of a career in religion, any more than Luther and Calvin, who both chose the law. Luckily, by the special favor of a friendly bishop, Erasmus

The air is soft and delicious. The men are sensible and intelligent. Many of them are learned. They know their classics, and so accurately that I have lost little in not going to Italy. The English girls are divinely pretty and they have one custom which cannot be too much admired. When you go anywhere on a visit, the girls all kiss you. They kiss you when you arrive. They kiss you when you go away. They kiss you when you return. Once you have tasted how soft and fragrant those lips are, you would spend your life here.

—ERASMUS ON ENGLAND IN 1497

was exempted from residence, permanently—another sign of clerical laxity. The young monk was able to lead the life of a Renaissance Humanist (74>).

His mastery of Greek, then a new accomplishment, made him a favorite of princes eager for learning, and he became the oracle of the enlightened on all subjects of timely interest. Popes consulted him and offered him bishoprics and (twice) a cardinal's hat. Universities wanted him on their faculty, Henry VIII tried to keep him at his court, Charles V took his advice, Luther begged for his support—and turned vindictive when it was refused. In between these flattering gestures he was reviled—by the monks in loud chorus, or censured by the pope when Rome's policy wavered, or cold-shouldered by erstwhile friends when he wrote a letter they disagreed with: before and during the revolution, much public argument was carried on in correspondence. Seeing the effect of his writings, Erasmus rightly judged that his power lay in his pen, not in titles or partisan activism.

Erasmus had welcomed the Evangelical movement and he contributed to it both by his edition of the Greek text of the New Testament and by a variety of popular works. He was the first Humanist to earn his living by his writings, which is a measure of his influence. Nothing like his sway over the minds of his contemporaries has been seen since; not even Voltaire or Bernard Shaw approached it; for by their time Protestantism itself, in making the clergy and men of letters two distinct social groups, had broken the link between the thinker and the bulk of the people. Erasmus was called many hard names but never “highbrow,” as he would be today.

Difference of generation plays a large part in the battle of ideas. Given his age—Erasmus was Luther's elder by nearly 20 years—he could not become an Evangelical. He was a good Christian, but he did not experience faith as a passion. As a scholar, too, he read scripture differently; he gave credence to the message but not to all the sayings and events—many were poetic statements, fables, allegories. And when he read the ancient classics he found figures of such near-Christian piety that he could exclaim only half-humorously, “Saint Socrates, pray for us!”

To Luther this was blasphemous frivolity. The Evangelicals despised the Humanists, even though some Humanists had long discarded the superstitions that Protestantism still attacked. When Erasmus would not accept Luther's denial of free will, the break was complete: Erasmus must be an atheist. The sectarians used that word to mean: disbeliever in *my* belief.

Erasmus was among other things a humorist, which to the earnest means one who trifles with serious things. But Erasmus was serious enough when he refuted Luther's doctrine that most of mankind was damned from all eternity, only a few being saved, and these not for leading a good life but, unaccountably, by God's grace. When this last phrase is used today, only a vague notion of chance or mischance is in the speaker's mind. Not so when John Bradford

on seeing a criminal led to the gallows exclaimed: "There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford." He felt it in his bones that God had from the beginning settled the outcome of the two men's lives. This was Predestination. The belief is still strong today and not among Protestants or religious believers alone (>29).

While Luther thought this mystery central to Christianity, and indeed "comforting," Erasmus rejected it as against reason. In his satirical skits depicting the life around him, he saw the interplay of wills free enough to choose good or bad, wise or foolish actions. These immensely popular *Colloquies*, dialogues between ordinary people, dealt with their petty predicaments—the soldier's troubles in civilian life, the wrangles of married folk, the tricks of an alchemist, the traveler's shabby treatment in German inns as compared with the French.

Though often poor and ailing, Erasmus loved travel and the good things of life, including the rapid, flashing conversation of learned friends in Paris, Oxford, and (at the end) in Basel, where he had his favorite printer-publisher. [The book to read is James Anthony Froude's *Life and Letters of Erasmus*.]

Erasmus summed up his criticism of life in one great work, *The Praise of Folly*. His friend Holbein the Younger liked it so well that he made in his copy pen-and-ink illustrations that have been often reproduced in modern editions. Folly, speaking for herself, shows how people of every rank and occupation prefer her to common sense, yet they give her a bad name, especially the worst fools. She at least is honest—no pretences—anybody can see what she is like. Her father was Plutus, the god of riches, by whom everything in the world is governed. (Denouncers of the current "materialistic culture," as if ours were the first of the kind, should take note.) Folly concludes that, all in all, the greater the madness, the greater the happiness.

By the author's art this entertaining paradox is expanded into a panorama of the times. The fiction is not strained. Unfortunately, the second half of the book, though still effective in its way, abandons "story" and drops into a direct attack against clerical and other abuses. The vivid reality is still there, but art has succumbed to political passion. This verbal assault against the hierarchy came a good while before Luther felt doubts about his church or even about his soul. Eight years elapsed between *The Praise of Folly* and the 95 Theses.

—Let me tell you: I've been on a visit to St. James of Compostello. —From curiosity, I suppose? —No, for the sake of religion. My wife's mother bound herself by a vow that if her daughter should give birth to a live male child, I, her son-in-law, should go to St. James in person and thank him for it. —Did you salute the Saint in your name or your mother-in-law's? —In the name of the whole family. —And what answer did you get? —Not a syllable. Upon handing over my present, he seemed to smile and gave me a gentle nod. —A most gracious saint, both in hospitality and midwifery!

—ERASMUS, *COLLOQUIES*

*
* *
*

By the time Luther and his followers had launched their onslaught, not seeing that it must lead to violence—or not caring—sober men on both sides kept seeking compromise. The Erasmian outlook did not vanish because Luther thundered. More than one bishop and cardinal was eager for reform and found the Evangelical vision congenial. Some Protestants also were ready to accept a halfway house if it was free of corruption and “superstition.” After the open break, Melancthon, Luther’s young protégé and spokesman, drafted a statement meant to reconcile and reunite the church; it was rejected by both parties. Still, the best minds, including the emperor, viewed a civil war with horror. When a courtier spoke to Charles of “heads rolling,” he replied: “No, my dear lord, no heads.” And the elector Frederick would say: “It is easy to take a life, but who can give it back again?”

Among the high clergy there were conciliators also. Cardinal Contarini spent his life trying to regain the loyalty of the Lutheran seceders while correcting the abuses of his own church. So outspoken was he on these points that he was suspected of being a crypto-Protestant. But he was a superb diplomat, highly esteemed as statesman and political theorist in his native Venice and ever welcome at Charles’s imperial court; so he survived, though he failed to recapture the straying flock.

An idea newly grasped stirs the blood to aggressiveness. From safe corners such as universities and monasteries, force was called for, and many laymen were not afraid to use it. They quoted Luther: “One must fight for the truth.” When possessions were at stake, whether simply threatened or taken over by the Protestants, armed conflict was inevitable. Pulpits, churches, and other religious houses, town offices, and the privileges that went with all of these changed hands—and more than once. Local sentiment, coupled with power, decided ownership.

Again it was chance that Emperor Charles V did not quickly give armed support to the Catholic princes and put an end to the revolution. But he was at war on another, even more endangered front. The armies of Islam—the Turks—held the Balkans, and their fleet, aided by accomplished pirates, the Mediterranean. Vienna, gateway to the West, was forever being threatened. Charles had to fight in North Africa as well as in Central Europe, while he must also defend his lands in Italy and the Netherlands against France and the heretics. There seemed no way he could finish off the Protestant usurpers at one stroke on the field of battle.

Civil war broke out when the imperial knights, an independent, poverty-stricken order, tried to recoup their fortunes under cover of the general unrest. Their leader, Götz von Berlichingen, became a German national hero, further glorified later in a play by Goethe. The knights were defeated, but a

satire written by another of them, Ulrich von Hutten, *Letters from Obscure Men*, so inflamed the monks, whom he held up to hatred, ridicule, and contempt, that the war fever became unquenchable.

Two years after the knights, the peasants rose up, with far better excuse. Luther at once approved their twelve demands, one of which was the right to choose their own ministers. The other articles begged for relief from the princes' pitiless exploitation. When the petition was rebuffed, thousands under the lead of Thomas Münzer took to pillage and killing. Luther backtracked and in his most vituperative vein called on the princes to destroy them. The end was massacre or exile for some 30,000 families.

Münzer had won their allegiance by proclaiming that all men were created equal and should remain so. An impossible idea, but how suggestive! Gospel simplicity, self-rule, faith unencumbered by authorities—PRIMITIVISM. These sentiments traveled wide. At Münster in 1534, a tailor known as John of Leyden set up with his Anabaptist followers the Kingdom of Zion. They terrorized the rest of the citizens, also in the name of equality but equal under John the despot, who kept a harem. The kingdom satisfied one of the recurrent dreams of the occidental mind: community of goods and of women.

It is interesting to note that when East Germany was under Soviet rule Münzer was a hero, and called so again in a *New York Times* article of recent date.^o As for John of Leyden, he could point to the New Testament on sharing goods and to the Old on plural wives. He was overthrown after a year, and in the usual fashion of this evangelical time put to death as horribly as it could be contrived. His reign furnished the matter for Meyerbeer's grand opera *Le Prophète* (1849).

Violent events were to be typical of European life till the middle of the 17C. Riot, combat, sieges and sacks of towns, burnings at the stake, and escape by self-exile repeat without letup. In Germany, 23 years of war, with breathing spells, kept in the field two unstable leagues of princes, Protestant and Catholic. In the Netherlands, the seesaw went on for a somewhat shorter time; likewise in the Swiss cantons, where the capable leader Huldreich Zwingli, by combining theology with economic reform, provoked the war in which he met his death. In France the last 30 years of the century were devoted to eight bouts of civil

Antwerp, 2nd May 1581

Eight days ago the soldiery and the Calvinists mutilated all the pictures and altars in the churches and cloisters of Belgium. The clergy and nearly 500 Catholic citizens were driven out and several cast in prison. Thus an end has been made of the Catholic faith in Brussels.

Antwerp, 6 May 1581

Four ships were laden with sculptured and carved statues, bells, brass and stone effigies of saints, candlesticks and other such-like ornaments from the churches. All are to be despatched to Narva and Moscow. The consigners hope to do good business with them.

—FUGGER NEWSLETTERS

war, with ambush, assassination, and massacre in between, including the famous one on the feast day of St. Bartholomew. The English Civil War, also impelled by sectarian passions, was reserved for the next century (>263). Luther admitted with his usual honesty that “he had never meant to go as far as he did.”

Erasmus had remained a reformer and it is his temper that has prevailed until very recently. The faith of most Christians in the centuries after him gradually became less literal, mystical, hellfired, and sectarian. The leading churches grew resigned to toleration and adopted the social gospel of doing good to others, while the expanding secular knowledge came to be seen as compatible with scripture. The interesting fact is that the great initiator of sectarian attitudes was himself not a sectarian through and through. This observation refers to

Luther

The image that the mindless jade Posterity retains of him is of the rough-hewn peasant, ready with blind courage and foul language to rout all opponents—“typically German,” some will say. It is true that according to Luther himself he did his best work in anger, and by a reverse snobbery he kept stressing his peasant origins, although he was the son of an artisan. But his need of that internal tonic rather suggests a character more complicated than the legend.

His achievement puts him in the class of great defiers and self-made rulers—Caesar, Cromwell, Napoleon, Bismarck—and like them he is only half understood if one ignores his imagination and sensibility. Certainly, Luther’s anxiety about his soul bespeaks not simply self-consciousness but also imagination; nor must his aggressiveness blind one to the passionate warmth of his affections and the rich variety of his gifts. Fortunately, his *Table Talk*, a work that ought to be as popular as Boswell’s *Johnson*, gives us the whole man. [A good version to read is that edited by Preserved Smith.°]

After the break with Rome, Luther turned his house into a kind of student hostel. Fellow preachers, disciples, scholars, refugees—mostly young—came from all over, unannounced, and used and abused his hospitality. At the big downstairs table in the Black Cloister, which was a wing of his former monastery, he would hold forth on the creed, on current events, on people and life at large. He was often poor and his wife, Kathie, would complain about the number of free boarders eating their heads off. He would then do some manual labor for cash or sell a silver drinking cup. Eight of his hangers-on, aided by two secretaries, have paid their debt by noting down and verifying one another’s reports of “the doctor’s” conversation. It tells us at the same time what the eager young wondered and argued about.

Luther alone among the Reformers stands beside Erasmus for range of mind. Well might he say, in spite of his humility, that “God could not do without wise men.” The daily side of him is all common sense and tender feelings. He married, not for love but from conscience, a plain-looking nun made homeless by having followed his teachings. He grew to value her loyal help and to love her dearly. And friendship was with him a cult. In his 50th year—old age then—he found himself bewailing the loss of one friend after another. The death of the closest, Haussmann, left him weeping distractedly for two days.

The soft-spoken Melanchthon, his early disciple and fourteen years his junior, he treated like a son and prized as his superior: “he is concise, he argues; instructs. I am garrulous and rhetorical.” Melanchthon, he adds, is a master of Greek and Latin; his own Latin vocabulary is insufficient and lacks elegance. But the young Humanist’s pamphlets are bitter. “I prefer to hit out like a boy.” This meant that the “boy” used an adult vocabulary of abuse. His antisemitic utterances are sheer vituperation. In the 16C and for a good 200 years more, insult was the accepted seasoning of intellectual debate. The solemn Milton, the sons of the Age of Reason, the aristocratic reviewers of Keats and Shelley used it freely. The mildest of Luther’s jibes was to call Dr. Eck, his chief antagonist, Dr. Geck (Dr. Goose). Yet Luther deplored the roughness of German manners and named it *Grobiana*, pseudo Latin from the German *grob*, which means coarse, boorish, uncouth. He inveighed against its frequent cause, drunkenness, “a filthy, scurvy vice.”

But Luther was no prude; his common sense shines in his repeated references to sexuality. He knew its power: as a monk he had tortured himself to fight desire, slept on stones, and found this treatment only making it worse. As he said, it is thoughts of “rosy cheeks and white legs” that drive young men to get engaged. “Early love is fervid and drunken, blinds us and leads us on.” So it is cruelty to young people to bind them to celibacy as priests, monks, or nuns. Even in marriage it is hard to be chaste. No fierce penalty ought to be visited on those who yield to a force of nature divinely ordained for the begetting of children.

A difficult case in point was put to him by his strong ally among the princes, Philip of Hesse, who, already married, wanted to marry a second wife. The first one was uncongenial and he was devoutly opposed to keeping a mistress. Luther of course wanted to save a good Evangelical from transgressing, and he found among the patriarchs of the Old Testament full justification for bigamy. He gave Philip citations and a caution: “Go ahead, but keep it quiet.” It could not be kept quiet. Protestants denounced the crime; Catholics gained a fine argument.

Even so, no one could accuse Luther of kow-towing to the great. He (and later Calvin and Knox) had a habit of addressing princes and princesses as if

they were naughty boys and girls. Clearly, the revolution did not stop one from playing the old role of priest—was he not called “father” for his exercise of moral authority? In the same spirit, with his prime defender the Elector Frederick, whom he never met but dealt with through a majordomo, Luther behaved like an intimate friend, not hesitating to reproach him with neglect.

After all, Luther was the head of a powerful party. Some called him the Protestant Pope, whose ruling must be sought on all questions. This he found an appalling chore. “Princes,” he said, thinking also of himself, “are gods burdened and tempted, whereas the people are blessed and without temptation.” He admired his political foe Charles V for shouldering such painful duties quietly and steadily. For 28 years Luther preached three or four sermons every Sunday, in addition to writing the innumerable tracts, Bible commentaries, translations, and the letters already mentioned. They come to 55 volumes in the standard English edition. It is no wonder that he left money matters and other domesticana to Kathie.

For relief from heroic deskwork he relied on the sights of nature. He had an intense love of living things and became something of a naturalist. He played the flute and the guitar, composing or adapting tunes to his own words. Some 40 hymns are attributed to him, including the superb *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*. Contemporaries said that these hymns did as much for the cause as his books. Indeed, the place of music was for Luther “next to theology. The Devil hates music because it drives away temptation and evil thoughts.” In the schools for boys and girls that Luther wanted to see established he would allow no man to teach who could not sing, “nor would I let him preach, either.”

I don't understand this wretched malady at all. I take it that it is made up, first, of the ordinary weakness of advanced age; second, of the result of my labors and habitual tension of thought; third and above all, of the blows of Satan. If so, there is no medicine in the world that will cure me.

—LUTHER (1543)

Alternating with passionate work were bouts of deep depression, illness (“the stone”), plus the self-discipline required by his faith. He must force his expansive heart-and-mind to obey the commands he found in the Bible. He read it through twice a year and thought it perfection, but concluded: “If one consults reason alone, one cannot assent to the articles of our faith.”

It was full of mysteries; “we are fools to try to explain them.” This makes preaching Christianity not only a hard task but also dangerous. “Had I known, I should never have been a preacher.”

This avowal from the rediscoverer of the gospel distinguishes him from most of his followers—one cannot imagine Calvin or Knox making such admissions—and brings him nearer to Erasmus than he knew. But one thing he did know: he was not “one of the prophets.” He “heard no voice”; he did

not even think himself “justified,” meaning saved. Yet here he was, doing God’s work, in part against the grain. “I smote the peasants; all their blood is on my head; the Lord God ordered it.”; some of his early books he found offensive. In touch with the unseen, he kept arguing with the Devil, and he was sure that witches must be put to death, quickly, to prevent great harm. Magistrates must not be squeamish. “Consider how harsh is the law of God the merciful when he says: ‘He that curseth his father or mother shall be put to death.’”

*
* * *

This unhappy reflection of Luther’s brings out one trait that marked the age. Once literal biblicism had taken hold, all imaginable acts of cruelty, moral, social, and political, found their warrant somewhere in scripture. And this, even though the two Testaments were at odds—harsh and merciful, as Luther observes. As in later secular ideologies that command total submission—say, Marxism—much depends on which part of which scripture is invoked. In the Protestant revolution, the Old or the New dominates one generation, one place, one leader or another. Or again, both are followed, inconsistently, and the interpreter alternately forgives like Christ and punishes like Jehovah. For merciful souls, piety can amount to a sacrifice of natural feeling in obedience to righteousness; to punish becomes a painful “work” in the Catholic sense.

Characteristically, Luther’s zeal in punishing was reserved for criminals and those in league with demons. Others, he thought, should not suffer for their opinions as he saw that they did in Geneva under Calvin. Luther also saw Melancthon working at astrology and continually predicting the emperor’s death; this was idolatry: “the stars have nothing to do with us.” But astrologers and alchemists were not to be punished or even badgered. Copernicus with his sun-centered astronomy was a fool exploiting a crazy point of view—let him alone. Humanists such as Erasmus were atheists and would be taken care of hereafter. It does not do to be grim about “big things without remedy.”

A strong sense of humor kept Luther (like Erasmus and unlike almost every other Reformer) from fretting about human weaknesses. He knew he shared them, and in keeping with the gospel, he preferred the repentant sinner to the self-righteous. In fact, he burst out several times against “the merely good man.” This antagonism between faith and moral conduct has been repeatedly manifested in western culture. A latter-day form of it appears in the scorn of “the bourgeois and his values.” Respectability seems dull and cowardly compared to sin and crime. It was in this mood that Luther prepared himself to give a sermon about Noah, the patriarch noted for his

drunkenness: writing it the night before, Luther “laughed as he took a big swig of beer.”

But then comes the difficulty. To hold the true faith, Scripture is the only guide: every word of it is “a precious fruit,” of plain meaning, not to be turned into allegory. Doing so was what made atheists. Luther mocked the breed: “I’ll write them a few allegories myself.” At the same time, a man of intelligence and honesty such as Luther cannot be blind to the many contradictions in the divinely inspired text. He must have suffered when, on Old Testament authority, he recommended bigamy (and secrecy) to Philip of Hesse, knowing that St. John and St. Paul, his favorite apostles, would never have condoned that solution. Again, he had to dismiss St. James as “a gospel of straw,” because it called for good works as an earnest of faith.

At the end as at the beginning in his monastic days, he confessed how feelings and belief struggled within him. His favorite daughter had died, and he cried out: “Darling Lena, it is well for you. I am happy in spirit, but the flesh is sorrowful.” Every passing year added to his unhappiness—defections from the new teachings; the lessening of his influence; increasing greed everywhere (“the princes are profiteers”). The world was “ungrateful for the gospel”; the Turks were “invincible”; the emperor kept making gains against the Protestant League; in short, his life’s work was unraveling. Surely the end of the world was near. People were seeing visions—blood, figures, and fiery crosses in the sky. It could not last; the finish was at hand.

His own end came not quite 30 years after the posting of the theses, in 1546. The next year Wittenberg was besieged and the then Elector of Saxony captured and dispossessed. Luther’s revolution was doomed. Another eight years of struggle had to pass before peace within Germany was concluded. It recognized the independence of the new sect, but collectively. Every German prince could go the Evangelical or the Catholic way (likewise every town), but his subjects would be bound by his choice; they could leave freely; self-exile would be the lot of the recalcitrants. In this last provision INDIVIDUALISM was implied and partly actual. Nothing had been achieved universally, but the revolution was a *fait accompli* and for large portions of the occident life had radically changed.

The New Life

IN HIS *JUDGMENTS ON HISTORY*, Burckhardt summarizes the Reformation as an escape from discipline. EMANCIPATION is indeed the immediate appeal of all revolutions. They inflame the feeling that life in society is perpetual constraint, the eternal cause of Freud's "discontents." This feeling goes with another, that the ancestral scheme of things is a heavy routine, not sufficiently relieved by the free play of Erasmian "folly." Again, boredom and fatigue.

Burckhardt's verdict reminds us that the thick crust of custom that broke in the early 16C did not consist solely of abuses; nor did the revolution benefit in a material way only the princes. It threw off Everyman's shoulders a set of duties that had become intolerable burdens. The "works" denounced by the Evangelicals took a daily expenditure of cash, time, and trouble. The service of the Mass had been free, but celebrating the other milestones of life—a child's christening and first communion, a couple's marriage, and the final rites at bedside and gravesite—cost money. Penance after confession of sin might entail a pilgrimage to a shrine or some other tangible sacrifice and, latterly, the purchase of an indulgence.

The good Christian must give alms regularly and pay for votive candles or special masses for the sick or the dead. Then would come the "Gatherer of Peter's Pence," to help the pope rebuild St. Peter's in Rome; and next, the begging friar knocking at the door. To carry a body across town to the cemetery the fee was one noble (about six shillings), the price of 20 prayers for the departed. In certain predicaments a dispensation was required, an expensive necessity. It was galling, too, to see one's tithes (the 10 percent church tax on land) going not to the poor parish priest but to the prosperous monks nearby, who did little or nothing toward saving the souls of the taxpayers.

The demands on time and effort included confession, fast days, and taking part in processions on the many holidays. Some of the pious rich might feel obliged to establish a chantry, an endowment for singing masses in perpetuity for the dead. Others, at death's door, would bequeath their goods and land to the church, thus depriving their heirs and shrinking the supply on the market.

These good deeds created the clerical interest—and the anti-clerical opposition. Princes saw their territories nibbled away when large estates were handed over to bishops already heads of provinces. Merchants and artisans in the free cities lost gainful working days as more and more saints' days were declared feast days. And since bishops had to pay their first year's revenue to the pope, while the people's pence took the same route, secular rulers felt alarm at the drainage of coin Romewards.

How much more anxiety than solace resulted from the incessant formal devotion cannot of course be gauged. A pilgrimage to far-off St. James of Compostella in the extreme west of Spain, or a trip to worship relics in the large town nearby, might gladden some sinners as a welcome break in routine, and so could the feasts and processions. Taking ritual trouble regularly was like our precautions for keeping up bodily fitness; prayer, confession, and fish on Friday were akin to jogging and counting calories; the distant shrine was the Mayo clinic. These analogies hold only for those who lacked fervor—always the greater number; but all knew that to fail in care about one's soul meant perdition. Regular exercises buttressed faith in sound psychological fashion until the system was denounced as a crude scheme of debits (sins) and credits (works) to be totted up on Judgment Day. When this banking operation collapsed, Luther could exclaim, "We have found the Savior again!"

To invoke the Savior in the place of works was to change reality; that is, to reshape culture and individual behavior. Worshipping the saints had been a kind of polytheism: they were the powers to entreat. Every living person, every activity and institution, every town and village was dedicated to a patron saint, and aware of living under his or her protection. Many Catholics in Europe still celebrate not one's birthday, but the day of the saint after whom one is named. Travelers would rely on St. Christopher, sailors on St. Elmo, old maids on St. Catherine. One prayed to St. Germain for sick children, to St. Sythe for lost keys, and to St. Wilgefortis for getting rid of detested husbands. Those in hopeless trouble beseeched St. Jude.

This distributed worship had come into being when the early church converted the pagan populations of the West. To make the new creed intelligible and congenial, Christian rites and holidays were adapted to existing customs. Saints took the place of local deities; Christmas, Easter, Rogations (the springtime blessing of the fields) re-enacted the original pagan festivals. Hence the Puritan hostility to Christmas, forbidden by law for 22 years in 17C Massachusetts and, in our day, by the Truth Tabernacle in South Carolina (125 members), who hanged a Santa Claus in 1982 to make the point clear.

Luther was induced by overwhelming tradition to condone the worship of the Virgin Mary. The late Middle Ages, thinking of mercy as peculiarly maternal had made her, not Christ, the intercessor in forgiveness. Luther recalled that in his youth to mention Christ in a sermon was considered

“effeminate.” But Luther did not allow prayers to the Virgin’s mother, St. Anne, or to the rest of the blessed troop.

These details of the new life after Luther point to something easily overlooked: the revolution was strictly speaking not religious but theological. Christianity was not replaced by another *religion*. The Occident continued to believe in the same revelation of the divine events described in the old Scriptures. Everybody still moved about not only in fields and streets but in an unseen world full of dangers, though ruled by a Power righteous and eternal, who governed every event and took note of every motion of the spirit within the individual soul.

The overturn, then, was in the slowly built-up system of ideas surrounding the faith, which is to say ideology. The more modern term makes it easier to understand the fury unleashed among the multiplying sects, each differently revisionist. It also explains the moral paradox of “wars of religion” in the name of a Christ who preached the brotherhood of man. On that injunction there seemed to be a meeting of minds; it meant: “Be my brother or I will kill you.”

*
* *
*

To understand the feelings that kept up the sectarian bloodshed, it is not enough to cite material interests. These did lead to war, but the passion was for more than winning back possessions or exacting revenge. What makes it hard to recapture the quality of religious beliefs in the 16C is that so much has happened since to draw the human mind and heart away from the goal of saving one’s soul. The meaning of faith has changed, its native quantity has been divided, its quality diluted. People blithely speak of someone’s (or their own) religious *preference*—as if it were something like a taste in food or sport.

The change has come about not simply because, for the majority in the Occident, physical science has usurped the place of “our best hope and trust.” It has come about because every believer is surrounded by a host of non-believers, as well as by believers in many different creeds. All being tolerated, all must be worthy of belief, all are in some way “right.” In the 16C and earlier too, there were some atheists, but Disbelief is one thing—it can be explained away as perverse wickedness. *Unbelief* is something else, far more unsettling to the believer, especially when it becomes the norm. When faith loses its singleness, its central role in life fades away, and with it the feeling that comes from knowing one’s view of the world universally shared. When all around take fundamental ideas for granted, these must be the truth. For most minds there is no comfort like it.

This is not to say that the Protestant Revolution ended by destroying all belief. Millions of church-goers today, hundreds of sects, prove its vigorous survival (<10; 28>). Indeed, in the 1990s the believers’ attacks on what they

call “secular Humanism” are so vehement that after a long slump religion has regained an important place in public debate (40>). But Protestantism did destroy in the West the possibility of that ancient solace, single truth and unanimous belief.

Religion defined, Middle Ages and Early Modern Times:

—A monastic order. —A reference to outward signs rather than inward faith. *Root meanings, various:* —To collect, bring together. —To tie back, to bind. —To read over. —Tradition. —To reverence from fear. —Scrupulous attention, to re-collect oneself.

—FROM DICTIONARIES IN SEVERAL LANGUAGES

was simply *what is*, just as today nobody has “a physics”; there is only one and it is automatically taken to be the transcript of reality.

The 20C obviously needed a new word to recharge *belief* with its full meaning. Hemingway in his book on Spain tried to do this by saying: “It was not something he believed in. It was his Belief.” With a like intent, some modern theologians call belief “the interruption of faith”—virtually a heresy—because belief implies a statement or thought “about” the object of faith, which distracts the mind from being suffused by its reality. This view in fact dates back to St. Augustine in the 5C.

Catholicism has a conception of the Christian ideal: to become nothing in this world. Protestantism is worldliness from beginning to end.

—KIERKEGAARD (A 19C PROTESTANT)

The Reformation was the scraping of a little rust off the chains which still bind the mind. ... Darwinism is the New Reformation.

—T. H. HUXLEY (A 19C AGNOSTIC)

Whether more or less faithful, people before, during, and after the revolution never doubted that they needed God’s help from moment to moment. In their letters they invariably call for God’s blessing on the recipient, on the sinful age, on the writer’s next trip or project. Merchants opening a new ledger dedicate it on the first page: “In the name of God and profits.” Striking incidents are divine warnings or commands, as when young Luther, terrified by a thunderstorm on his way to law school, felt his fright as a sign of God’s will that he should serve Him. Then and there the youth took a vow to become a monk.

Prayers were in order several times a day, like our hygienic ablutions,

Not that in what is called “the ages of faith” everybody understood the one faith alike or with the same degree of devotion. To some, as always, salvation meant only personal safety, or even less: mere conformity. The point is that in earlier times people rarely thought of themselves as “having” or “belonging to” a religion. The word itself had various uses. Everybody “had” a soul, but did not “have a God,” for God and all that pertained to Him

because the Devil and his minions were as ubiquitous as our viruses. Satan went up and down the earth like a campaigning politician making promises. During his own travels Luther found him in woods, thick clouds, and waste places. He knew that the Devil's interference accounted for the varying fortunes of the Evangelical cause. Witches close at hand were a menace too, even when they offered to cure ailments and did so. Catholics of course could counteract Satanic intentions by calling on saints or relics for help. Practical Christianity for both groups resembled the eastern heresy called Manichean: two powers run the world, the evil one must be fought and the good placated.

These vicissitudes were a reminder of the worth of salvation. To gain it puts an end to all troubles and the assurance of it is the greatest boon—hence the “comfort” that Luther found in predestination. By it salvation is guaranteed to the elect. They have grace, a free gift that no deed can obtain. Even so, the best of Christians might feel anxious when ill or on the point of death: was he or she really destined for eternal life? Salvation in the 16C and long after was understood as “resurrection of the flesh.” The promise of the gospel was literal: the body would come into being again. As the learned told those who asked, St. Augustine had explained that the hair shed in life and the fingernails cut would be restored in full, though invisibly, in the new heavenly body.^o

The different phrase now in use, “immortality of the soul,” promises something less definite, a faceless, disembodied bliss. It had no wide currency till later centuries. As a Catholic dogma, it dates only from 1513 and it was not then addressed to the people, but to the learned. It was intended to refute certain philosophers who had talked about a “unity of the intellect,” meaning by it a

fund of spirit emanating from God, out of which the soul is fashioned and to which it returns. These philosophers' notion anticipated 19C European and American Idealism with its Absolute as both God and reservoir of soul-substance.^o The prospect of individuality lost in a merger with others would have been intolerable to Evangelicals and Catholics alike, particularly the former, whom William James called “the unsocial Protestants” for their insistence on having each what one might call today his “hot line” to God.

So important did some 16C believers consider individuality that they declared each soul separately created. Others were content with a collective origin. The former were called Creationists. The name now refers to those who attack Evolution and believe that the whole human race was created in and through Adam and Eve.

The Turks tell their People of a Heaven where there is a sensible Pleasure, but of a Hell where they shall suffer they don't know what. The Christians quite invert this order; they tell us of a Hell where we shall feel sensible Pain, but of a Heaven where we shall enjoy we can't tell what.

—JOHN SELDEN, c. 1650

*
* *

So much for ideology. The revolution also changed other parts of cultural reality. The Protestant church, the building itself, was no longer the town hall for public business, the banquet hall on feast days, and the theater for moral dramas. Nor were any burlesques put on there, no Feast of Fools, run by a “lord of misrule” for the annual saturnalia that afforded a relaxation of discipline. If newly built, the Protestant “meeting house” could not serve like the cathedrals as a refuge for women and children in wartime, and certainly not as a sanctuary for criminals; its central and civic role was gone.

With each new sectarian reform, the houses of worship became more and more bare of ornament. Luther did not object to flowers, nor did he, like some zealots, want to break the stained glass of the ancient churches or vandalize the sculptures. But pictures and altar cloths, candles and relics, and the crucifix must go, incense too, and the priests’ vestments, of which the Roman church had a profusion. Color and cloth, shape of hat or stole, gold or silver ornament or piping went with rank or occasion and made up an impressive show. It was, said the English Puritans and Presbyterians, “idolatry dressed up.” Significantly, for those on whom the pull of religion is partly sensuous, Catholicism has remained their church; it has recaptured them in each generation. For the rest, the age-old association of the church with art was broken forever.

In the new church the minister, probably a married man with children, officiated in ordinary clothes. The parson was none other than the *person* appointed to serve the rest, though he was still expected to have some learning and to be more or less formally ordained. The congregation acting as an independent body had chosen him; and as dissident sects multiplied, the congregations more and more assumed the support of their leader and their activities. The Lutherans still employed bishops, sometimes elected, and paid by the state. The Anglicans retained the hierarchy; other churches used laymen as deacons or elders. The thoroughgoing souls at last took Luther literally—“everyone a priest”—the Pietists and the Quakers “minister” to themselves.

Protestants of all types became self-sufficient also during the musical part of the service. No choir, no clerics sang on the congregation’s behalf the praise of the Lord. All the faithful gathered together sing, inexpertly but sincerely, simple words and tunes. The hymns, composed perhaps by Luther, are based on a psalm or a gospel idea versified, uttering threat or promise: “Whatever, Lord, we lend to Thee, Repaid a thousandfold will be.” No one kneels or confesses. Everybody partakes of communion “in both kinds,” meaning that each receives bread and wine—and it is real bread, a bit stale, not a consecrated wafer. Formerly, only the priest drank the wine, lest a layman should accidentally spill the blood of Christ. Clerics who did had their thumbs cut off.

Another discard: the mumbling in Latin to uncomprehending ears by an absentminded priest. Clear words in everyday language carried the homily, now called sermon. It has shrunk in size over the years, but when it first became the main part of the Evangelical service, and particularly when it celebrated public events, it could last three hours. Well into the 19C the “lesson” expounding a sentence or two from the Bible still needed an hour, and attendance at two services on one day was no uncommon habit. “The English Sunday” came to signify a peculiar division of human time.⁹ Lacking relics and images, Protestants go to church only for services (children for Sunday school), instead of at any hour of the day for prayer or recollection, as Catholics still do.

The Evangelicals made the sacraments less awesome. No rites for the dying, and the others ceremonial rather than magical. Communion—earlier, the Eucharist—was celebrated less often than the Mass had been; Luther thought four times a year was enough; and it could no longer help the dead or relatives and friends. Other emancipations: a Protestant could marry a first cousin and, if really “advanced,” could refuse to take oaths or serve as magistrate.

The change of greatest consequence, a cultural step comparable to Mohammed’s gift of the Koran to his people, was making the new life find its mental and spiritual food in the Bible. Luther had never seen a Bible until he was twenty. His very thorough religious education had been based on a selection from the church Fathers. But more than one thinker before him had wanted to bring the word of God to the people and a dozen translations into the common tongues had been made. Once again, it was Luther who compounded these efforts and made the Bible The Book for all Protestants (bible *means* book) and even forced it into the Catholic consciousness.

The results for Protestants were remarkable. To start with, it gave whole populations a common background of knowledge, a common culture in the high sense of the term. A 19C incident makes the point vivid: when Coleridge was lecturing in London on the great English writers, he happened to mention Dr. Johnson’s finding on his way home one night a woman of the streets ill or drunk in a gutter. Johnson carried her on his broad back to his own poor lodging for food and shelter. Coleridge’s fashionable audience tittered and murmured, the men sneering, the women shocked. Coleridge paused and said: “I remind you of the parable of the Good Samaritan” and all were hushed. No amount of moralizing could have done the work of rebuke and edification with such speed and finality.

The Bible was a whole literature, a library. It was an anthology of poetry and short stories. It taught history, biography, biology, geography, philosophy, political science, psychology,

Bibles laid open, millions of surprises!

—GEORGE HERBERT, “SIN” (1633)

hygiene, and sociology (statistical at that), in addition to cosmogony, ethics, and theology. What gives the Bible so strong a hold on the minds that once grow familiar with its content is its dramatic reporting of human affairs. For all its piety, it presents a worldly panorama, and with particulars so varied that it is hard to think of a domestic or social situation without a biblical example to match and turn to moral ends.

With the Bible most often the only book in the house, kept in a place of honor, and with its first blank page containing the family records—names, dates of birth, marriage, and death—came the practice of family prayers three or four times a day, besides grace at meals. It was natural that if father or grandfather read a story from scripture to the assembled clan, servants included, the feelings aroused should be summed up in the Lord's Prayer or some other appropriate to the moment. When secularism came to prevail, Bible reading disappeared among the majority, and with it the background of ideas and allusion common to all. In this role, the only ecumenical replacement one can think of is the daily newspaper's comic strip.

*
* * *

During the modern era dozens, scores, hundreds of Protestant sects have grown out of the first Evangelicism—the count at present is around 325 and unstable. Inner light, coupled with brooding over scripture, has been the efficient cause. Dissent has kept arising about details of practice as often as about articles of belief or the authenticity of the new prophets. Differences might be small but symbolic. The Amish reject machinery and the Mennonites buttons. The unbalanced but charismatic George Fox, to equalize ranks, made the Friends (the Quakers) use (misuse) *thee* instead of *you* and not take off their hats to anyone. The Mormons favor polygamy in obedience to an additional latter-day scripture; and by a still more recent prophecy, the Christian Scientists deny pain and, quite logically, medicine. Reserved to our own time are the cults in which salvation is reached by group suicide.°

The longest, most violent—and indeed blood-spattered—clashes were about the Eucharist, the Trinity, baptism, grace and merit, and predestination. The one tenet common to the Evangelicals was abhorrence of the Catholic church, the “whore of Babylon.” Only one group centered at Strasbourg and led by two able thinkers, Martin Bucer and Oecolampadius (Johann Huszgen), pleaded for agreement on the fundamentals and an end to lethal hair-splitting. They were called Fundamentalists, or even better, *Adiaphorists*, which means anti-destructionists. They were hated by all the others, excepting a scattering of thoughtful scholars or statesmen. Mildness and wisdom did not suit the times. Today, in Islam as in Christian lands, Fundamentalism means the opposite of the Strasbourgers' temper and its expression is expectably violent.

Were these issues matters of moment to their time only? Not if one makes some effort to see the cultural continuity between two modes of interpreting human experience. Granted the differences of language and social environment, the parallels will show the path we have traveled.

To the first Reformers, the Eucharist, which means thanksgiving and commemorates Christ's Last Supper with the Apostles, was the central sacrament, as it was to the Catholics. But the Protestants balked at the notion of the priest as a miracle-worker who transformed the bread and wine into Christ's flesh and blood—transubstantiation. Lutherans believed in consubstantiation: the blood and flesh side by side with the ordinary materials. This was called the Real Presence, a mystery, but not a magical act done by a man in a cassock. The Calvinists took the bread and wine as symbols only, simple reminders of the Last Supper. When Calvin was questioned about the Real Presence, he said that Christ was everywhere and hence present at the sacrament also. The mystery was removed to a distance.

The Calvinist thus edges a little closer to seeing poetic meaning and psychological truth in periodic thanksgiving to lessen pride and ego. The naturalistic interpreter goes the whole way and sees that it is the sinner, cleansed of sin and grateful for pardon, who has undergone a wondrous transformation: his spirit is now as Jesus would have it. Is this a mystery or not? No answer seems conclusive if we ponder any important change in ourselves—for example, how our bodies cure themselves, sometimes nudged by “miracle” drugs; sometimes by placebos in the form of bread pills; occasionally by an emotional shock. Again, when our minds undergo sudden, profound alterations—in opinion or belief, in love, or in what is called artistic inspiration—what is the ultimate cause? We see the results, but grasp the chain of reasoning at a link well below the hook from which it hangs.

Next, consider Predestination, which states that individual merit does not ensure salvation and that man has no free will. This has been the most widely held Protestant dogma. When an idea possesses so many minds and such good ones, it is foolish to write it off as fantasy; one must look for the experience on which it rests. Luther supplies it: his seven years of helplessness till lifted up by grace. It was said earlier that predestination was still maintained by a good many non-believers (<12); they might be surprised to hear it; they do not, indeed, believe that eternal damnation is decreed for the many, including unbaptized infants. But they do believe in scientific determinism—the unbreakable sequence of cause and effect, and that is predestination. It is the assumption all laboratory workers make and it rules out free will. Any

Let us drop these diabolical words, these party names, these factional, seditious terms—Lutheran, Huguenot, Papist—let us not change the name of Christian.

—CHANCELLOR MICHEL DE L'HOPITAL AT
THE OPENING OF THE ESTATES GENERAL
OF 1560

present state of fact, any action taken, is the inevitable outcome of a series of events going back to the Big Bang that produced the universe.

Social scientists and common folk who babble about genes or the Unconscious or “man a chemical machine” similarly account for others’ actions and their own as did Luther and Calvin. The road taken was set from all eternity, with no choice at any moment: will is an illusion. The sense of being driven by a power not ourselves is not uncommon, especially among great doers and creators. Some temperaments seem born worshippers of Necessity—Frederick the Great for instance, who outgrew his Calvinist upbringing but remained a fierce determinist. Modern criminology is rooted in this conviction and public opinion in the main agrees: the criminal is not responsible for his acts; he is “conditioned.” Grace (the right heredity or environment) has been denied him.

Other root beliefs of the 16C also have their present counterparts. Luther’s agonizing about sin is matched by the Existentialist preoccupation with *Angst*, or despair at “the human condition.” Unaccountable “guilt” may be said to be popular today, notably among the many sufferers of depression. It is sometimes cured, as Luther’s was, by introspection, on the analyst’s couch and by acceptance of what is thus revealed. Catholic confession was a summary form of the therapy.

Nor has the word *sin* disappeared from the vocabulary of the enlightened. More than one modern novelist, poet, or social theorist has attributed the horrors of our time to original sin, although its definition is left vague. It presupposes that human nature is fatally flawed. This is a more ruthless belief than the theologian’s, since it does not include a Redeemer from sin or the efficacy of baptism. In the 16C both together lifted that terrible burden. For some in our day what redeems “scientifically” is political revolution, after which history will stop and society will know happiness without laws—in other words, the Kingdom of the Saints fought for by the Anabaptists and others for 100 years (<15; 265>).

Keeping in mind the endless translation of ancestral thoughts and feelings effected by evolving culture, we can follow with sympathy the Reformers’ arguments and the choices among the mysteries that they confronted. Luther said of the Trinity that he did not so much believe it as find it true in experience. What could he have meant? In the present century that excellent scholar and fine critical mind Dorothy Sayers affirmed the same thing and explained it (742>): the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit preside over all acts of creation, artistic and other, each Person playing a distinct part. [The book to read—hers—is *The Mind of the Maker*.] It is true that she allegorizes in the way Luther reprovved, but can he have done anything else if it was experience and not faith alone that made him a Trinitarian?

Some of his contemporaries clamored instead for Unity. Servetus, a

Spanish physician, paid with his life at the hands of Calvin for disbelieving that three could simultaneously be one. He has been called "a martyr to truth," but it is only fair to say that he was just as rabidly bent on persecution as his opponents, and he did much to provoke Calvin in secular ways before the

reluctant decision was taken to put him to death. Again about the Trinity, the Sozzini, uncle and nephew, Italian refugees in Poland, argued that rejecting polytheism and the worship of the saints must mean one God and not three. Their adherents, first called Socinians, have been the Unitarians, notably influential in the thought and literature of New England (505>). Logically, the existence of only one God must mean that all religions are one. Innumerable thinkers, from Voltaire and Victor Hugo to Bernard Shaw and Gandhi, have said so, without much effect on western religious institutions.

The point of drawing parallels between 16C conceptions and the latter-day naturalism, which has obscured but not abolished them, is to show the persistence of meanings within altered expressions of life's mysteries. It is an abstract continuity, for likeness is not sameness. In history everything observed wears its own dress and raises images peculiar to itself. Protestants and Catholics 500 years ago were not "for all practical purposes" our doubles who happened to talk poetically instead of scientifically. The Socinian's God was not "the principle of unity"; he was Christ the Lord saving sinners. The likeness in these similars is in the human motive: the idea of worshipping one God is akin to the scientific hope of bringing all phenomena under one law.

*
* *
*

Juniors are impatient. In any movement, the second generation is likely to be dissatisfied with what it has inherited, including the confused state of affairs produced by the pioneers. The urgent duty is to create a system, a single doctrine, that will exclude the new dissenters, rally the uncertain, and make one flock of the faithful.

For this kind of task, ambition is the agent that selects the leaders. There is no "legitimacy" in revolution; power belongs to whoever can seize it; and the newcomer is most apt to gain it who is most "pure," strict, and systematic. John Calvin was such a man. With a politician's eye and a lawyer's mind, he saw that Luther's piecemeal polemics, coupled with everybody's access to the Bible, endangered Reform. Anybody who could read might think himself "called" to found the true church of God. Extreme views encouraged crackpots and rabble rousers, and the Adiaphorists of Strasbourg were compro-

The minister and his lay visitor, both Protestants, had talked over amiably the differences between their creeds. It was a beautiful lesson in toleration, which the minister neatly summed up: "Yes, we both worship the same God, you in your way and I in His."

—TRADITIONAL IN NEW ENGLAND

misers, too broad to be right. Some Catholic priests who had turned Protestant ministers went so far in diversity as to keep offering Mass to their old flock and the Lutheran service to others.

So in 1534 Calvin issued his first book, a small one. It was the germ of Calvinism, which brought about the division of the Protestants into two main bodies. The book was *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (institutes then meaning teachings), a work often compared to Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. It cannot compare. The *Institutes* as we have it grew by periodic additions to what was no more than an essay, and though in its final form it is coherent enough, it is not a comprehensive philosophical system. It simply organizes the several evangelical beliefs and anchors them in scripture; it is in fact and purpose a textbook. Its effect on ordinary minds was powerful, but it did not put an end to all innovations. The fertility of the western intellect is great.

For example, Agricola, a good theoretical mind, preached a kind of early Quakerism. He argued that Luther's repudiation of "works" forbade doing anything at all to express belief; if one had genuine faith, one could choose the rules one would obey. Martin Bucer, mentioned earlier, had a vision of the cosmos that was widely adopted, 200 years later, under the name of Deism: God endowed the world that He created with laws to make it endure and He does not intervene in their working. With Providence thus eliminated, the interpretation of events as signs of divine displeasure goes by the board and the importance of prayer and ritual is nil.

In this galaxy the figure of Sebastian Castellio is particularly attractive. He was born in French Burgundy, his original name being Châteillon. His humanistic studies at Lyon soon led him to Protestantism and so to Strasbourg, where he met Calvin. Called by him to Geneva, Castellio was made rector of the academy at the age of 25. But in his biblical studies—he was a master of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—he interpreted texts in a spirit too liberal to suit his patron and he was refused ordination as minister. He moved to Basel and suffered poverty, but was at last appointed professor of Greek at the university.

Like his colleagues everywhere, he had to argue about predestination and the Trinity and over this latter issue he condemned the Calvinists' execution of Servetus. Out of this debate came what is the first appearance in print of the momentous question: "Whether Heretics Should be Persecuted." Castellio argued the negative. The date was 1554. His translation of the entire Bible, first into classical Latin, then into lively vernacular French, did not keep him from being persecuted and he ended his life poor and a wanderer. His merits were known to a kindred spirit, Montaigne, who has a warm word for him in the *Essays*.

A few others arrived at Castellio's position on heretics: Conrad Mutian, a Deist in the sense given above, believed that all religions are one and thus

could see no point in persecution. Tyndale, another translator of the Bible, argued that to make a belief prevail by fear was wrong and contrary to Christ's word (though "Compel them to come in" could be instanced on the side of force). These solitary Tolerationists were regarded with horror: they simply did not understand the reasons, religious and secular, that justify the drive to uniformity (271>).

Yet another innovator, Carlstadt, once Luther's good friend, took it into his head that as a preacher he must live like the lowest of the low, in shabby clothes, "acting the peasant on his dunghill" (so Luther jeered). Carlstadt denied the Real Presence of Christ at communion, which made him a kind of Calvinist in the Lutheran fold.

The gentlest among dissenters from dissent came to be known, with the usual mocking intent, as Pietists. Their prophet was Jacob Boehme, a shoemaker. He carried Luther's simplification as far as it could go. God, he said, knows whether one's piety is genuine. If it is, that is enough—no need of ministers or deacons, of church buildings and services, not even of a name to define a group. In quiet sessions at home or anywhere convenient, pious friends come together to pray and meditate on divine truths. Did not the gospel say that the Lord was wherever two or three are gathered together? Pietism had a lasting influence. It inspired several cohesive sects, such as the Moravian Brothers still extant in Pennsylvania, the Familists (who emulate the Holy Family), the Society of Friends (Quakers), and a quickly suppressed outburst of Catholic mysticism in France, which pitted in controversy two of the greatest writers of the age (298>).

In the Netherlands, Jacob Hermansz, known as Arminius, put forth a doctrine unwelcome to the tough-minded: Redemption through Christ was for all souls, predestination was not absolute but conditional. Everyone can by his efforts cooperate in attaining grace and be saved—there is free will after all. Akin to the Catholics' "natural grace," this view was soon condemned by all parties, but it quietly found favor among Anglicans and was adopted in the 18C by John Wesley and his Methodists.

**We have a Calvinist creed, a Popish liturgy,
and an Arminian clergy.**

—WILLIAM PITT, EARL OF CHATHAM (c. 1760)

A last eccentric who should not be forgotten is the German Kaspar Schwenkfeld. If, he said, each soul has a unique destiny, then each man and woman may frame his or her creed within the common Christian religion. They deserve to have faith custom-tailored to their needs. Today, when Individualism has turned from a fitful theme to a political and social right, this seer deserves to rank as the Reformer with the greatest following—millions are Schwenkfeldians *sans le savoir*. A suitable name for their one-man church would be Privatist, if its very character did not forbid its having any name at all.

There remains to look into the work of the pre-eminent ideologist of the 16C, the reformer of Reform,

Calvin

His achievement was to combine in practice Luther's two statements about the Christian's liberty: individual salvation through faith, and subjection to society as antidote to anarchy. The second clause means the control of morals and manners by the state, a system that Calvin brought about without any planning. A provincial French lawyer and humanist scholar, he had gone to Paris and picked up Lutheran ideas. The Sorbonne, keeper of Catholic orthodoxy, reprimanded him and he went to Strasbourg, then the center of Protestant polemics. A bit later, by the age of 32, he was governing souls and behavior in Geneva, one might say, through no fault of his own: in passing through the city he was urged to stay and help out a Reformist minority struggling with the city fathers.

Contrary to common belief, Calvin was not fond of power. Generally in poor health, he preferred study and he did not repine when, in the local struggle, Geneva expelled him. He was soon called back, after which his life was that of a prime minister fighting the crown—the municipal government. Calvin guided, threatened, and conciliated by turns to keep Protestantism in being. Under such conditions no practical detail was too trivial for his attention, just as no backsliding seemed a trifle to his moral sense. But unlike most martinets and bureaucrats, he also had large ideas which he knew how to set forth persuasively. His *Institutes*, now a classic in Latin and French, grew to full length from 1535 to 1559 as the needs of instruction increased with the flood of students pouring into Geneva to hear him. He made the town a second Wittenberg.

The two oracles respected each other, warily. Luther, who had only five years to live when Calvin's fame began to spread, was not best pleased to see so many new recruits differing from his theology only in details and yet bearing a new name. But Calvin—a sort of Lenin to Luther's Marx—may well have saved Protestantism when it was at a low ebb. In Germany after Luther's death, Charles V was winning the war. While Wittenberg and the Elector of Saxony were vanquished, Calvinism was flourishing to the north and west.

Its pulling power was not due to a book alone. The Academy or college that Calvin founded to train ministers and that was to become the city university, made Geneva a European center of learning. The latest converts, the young seekers, the lost souls went there, listened, and more often than not came out missionaries. John Knox, for instance, who a few years earlier had been a galley slave in the Mediterranean, got his training at the Academy before "conquering" Edinburgh. Once there, he sent promising young Scots

to the source of light in Geneva. The place was buzzing with foreigners of all ages and origins. It was a Mecca for the enthusiasts, a city of refuge for exiles.

To talk of Calvin and Knox inevitably brings to mind the label Puritan. It belongs to England and New England rather than Switzerland and Scotland, and like other nicknames it is made to cover too much (262>). Only one feature properly connects it to Calvin: the desirability of self-restraint, in itself not a strange idea. Revolutions paradoxically begin by promising freedom and then turn coercive and “puritanical,” to save themselves from both discredit and reaction (428>). Creating a purer life requires that people forget other aims; therefore public and private conduct must be regimented. That is why the theme applicable to revolution is EMANCIPATION and not Freedom. Old shackles are thrown off, tossed high in the air, but come down again as moral duty well enforced.

In Geneva under Calvin people must go to church twice daily. When a truant from services, an adulterer, or a blasphemer was reported by the vigilant elders, someone was sent at once to the erring brother or sister to admonish gently and plead rather than scold.

But there was also “the Discipline.” If stubborn and persistent in sin, the dear soul must be turned over to the civil authorities. Adultery might mean death, quite as if Jesus had not dealt rather differently with the woman taken in adultery. Blasphemy, that curious crime of “damaging God by bringing Him into ill-repute,” was even more unforgivable. Sometimes, alas, for political reasons, a culprit in Geneva might be spared, but social pressure was intense, and the threat of hellfire ever present. Besides, by withholding communion, that is, by excommunication, Calvin could cut off a person from all social intercourse whatever.

Calvinism, it has been said, makes every man the enemy of every other, as well as his own. Certainly its rigor accounts for the agonizing fear of sin that has been recorded in many lives—

Bunyan’s two years of terror; the poet Cowper’s repeated plunge into wild despair when he *knew* that his soul was lost; Byron’s lifelong conviction, born of his harsh Calvinist rearing, that everything he found good would turn to evil because *wrong*. Still more surprising, Rousseau’s Genevan birth and upbringing influenced his philosophy of life and of the state. The number of plain people, especially adolescents, whose minds were tortured by Calvinist sermons in England and America may be imagined.

In theory at least, Calvin himself was not the extinguisher of pleasure that

The Church has no punishment but withholding the Lord’s Supper. It has no sword to punish or restrain, no empire to command, no prison, no other pains.

—CALVIN, *INSTITUTES* (1536)

Hell’s Flames Avoided and Heaven’s Felicities Enjoyed

by John Hayward, D.D., 10th Edition, 1696,
33rd Edition, 1733

There is no middle way between these two things: either the earth must be worth nothing to us, or keep us fettered by an intemperate love of it. ¶ The contempt which believers should train themselves to feel for the present life must not beget hatred of it or ingratitude to God. It has many enticements, a great show of delight, grace, and sweetness. We ought to have such fondness for it that we regard it as one of the gifts of divine goodness which are by no means to be despised. ¶ If heaven be our country, what can earth be but a place of exile? Let us long for death and constantly meditate upon it.

—CALVIN, “OF MEDITATING ON
THE FUTURE LIFE”

Calvinism has come to suggest. In Geneva, playing cards and other recreations were not forbidden. As for enjoyment in general, it was a point on which he and Luther were as Box and Cox: Luther wrote that “the Christian man is dead to the world,” yet, as we saw, he granted a large place to instinct and nature; he relished life (<17). The ailing Calvin was not a relisher; his advice is contradictory and leaves nature a rather narrow crack through which to manifest God’s goodness.

*
* *
*

When the two great sects are taken as wholes, the geographical lines of demarcation at the end of the 16C are clear, though not exact. The German states were generally Lutheran, part of France and of the Netherlands were Calvinist. Sweden and its neighboring dependencies were Lutheran, Switzerland two-thirds Calvinist. England made a creed of its own more anti-papal than thoroughly reformed. Scotland was Calvinist. But everywhere enclaves of heresy and rash individuals occupied the persecutors for nine generations.

Self-repression for the sake of freeing the spirit had other than strictly religious consequences. It resembles the ethos of the ancient Stoics, and we shall not be surprised to find their doctrine adopted as a living philosophy by many humanists in Calvin’s day and the century following (52>). Clearly it was not his influence alone but something in the common temper that made discipline congenial. After the expansiveness of rebellion and the excitement of a new turn in culture, there is savor in austere deportment and sober expectations. Oddly enough, these ways of dealing with the self have in our day been believed to throw light on a complex economic question: the rise of Capitalism. Thanks to repetition, the thesis proposed by two scholars, one German, the other English, has become a thought-cliché: the Capitalist system owes its birth and success to the moral teachings of the Reformers. The Protestant “work ethic” created the entrepreneur, the economic man as we know him under capitalism.

But was the God-fearing Protestant—anxious soul—really predestined to be a capitalist? The sociologist Max Weber and the socialist R. H. Tawney wrote quasi classic books that give complementary accounts of this supposed cultural connection. It pleased the modern critics of Capitalism by linking

that system and its evils to a “straitlaced morality” and “a discredited theology,” at the same time as it vexed the strict Marxists by substituting a spiritual for a materialistic agency in the march of history.

Weber and Tawney based their thesis on social and psychological grounds: Protestantism, by leaving the believer in doubt about his salvation, yet holding out the chance of grace, encourages him to act as if already an elect—sober, earnest, hardworking. His moral code makes him *calculating* at every turn—the ideal man of business. On earth and beyond, he faces risk with fortitude while taking all thoughtful precautions. The Catholic, by comparison, is easy-going, pays his way spiritually by symbolic “works,” most of which have no practical effects on earth. Far from praising real work, he sees it as Adam’s curse. His church condemns as usury any demand for interest on loans. And the model man is not the one who achieves material success; on the contrary, poor and humble is the mark of sanctity.

These two studies brought out some interesting cases of moralizing about life and work, ranging from the Puritan Baxter to Benjamin Franklin and his canny Poor Richard. But neither Weber’s nor Tawney’s somewhat different demonstrations has stood up to criticism. For one thing, Weber’s notion of Puritan “asceticism” is an exaggeration, both verbal and factual (262>); and more important, Capitalism long antedates the Protestant revolution and hence must have had a “spirit” at that earlier time. Permitting usury and trade by means of capital were argued for in the late Middle Ages—and practiced. Medieval abbots lent their surplus funds at interest, and if the rate was no higher than ten percent, they received dispensation from the guilt of usury.

Again, large-scale banking thrived early in Italy—the Medici are the outstanding example—and so it was not the child of Protestantism. When it occurred, it was in Italy that it made the least headway. Facts from the Protestant side itself refute the thesis: both Luther and Calvin attacked profit-making and deplored “the materialism of the age.” (Every age is “materialistic” and fit for deploring.) Calvin reluctantly agreed to allow charging five percent interest in certain narrowly defined cases. He urged his flock to live as modestly as possible, so as to always leave something for charity. Whoever went in for Capitalist enterprise in the 16C was not spurred on by Calvin’s teaching or Luther’s. And throughout the 17th, preachers everywhere kept denouncing usury and lust for gain.

Besides, the newly Protestant countries did not lead Europe in economic progress. Catholic France outstripped all others till its costly wars in the late 17C set back its prosperity. As for the great towns of north Germany, the Netherlands, and the Baltic, their trade was flourishing long before the Reformers’ ideas reached them. A final point, which incidentally shows how poorly knowledge percolates in our “age of communication”: Weber in his

argument lists the Protestant ethic as only one element, which further study must relate to half a dozen others before it can be known how far “the Protestant ethic” promoted “the spirit of capitalism.””

*
* *

The cultural predicament after a revolution is how to reinstate community, how to live with those you have execrated and fought against with all imaginable cruelty. Here and there, to be sure, compromisers still existed after three decades of violence and abuse, and as late as the year before Luther’s death the Protestants were invited to send delegates to a Council of the church that was to meet at Trent to review Catholic teaching and practice. The opportunity was declined.

The Protestant Reformation being a revolution, it would seem logical that the Catholic Counter-Reformation devised at Trent should be called a counter-revolution. In fact, the theological and administrative decisions taken by the Council were not revolution but reform, the only reform of the century—a deliberate large-scale change without violence. The bishops were certainly deliberate: they took 18 years, in three bouts of discussion to reach a consensus. It was a providential schedule: old resisters could be gradually argued into their graves.

The English cardinal delegate Reginald Pole tells us what the Council aimed at: “the uprooting of heresies, the reform of ecclesiastical discipline and of morals, and lastly, the eternal peace of the whole church. These we must see to, or rather, untiringly pray that by God’s mercy they may be done.””

One of the means was to restate things clearly and require them strictly: the creed, the catechism and missal, the exclusive use of the Vulgate version of the Bible, and the guidelines governing the Index of Prohibited Books. The Roman Inquisition was revitalized and assisted by the bishops’ visitations; seminaries were established in Rome, one for each nation, and a mission given to designated orders, chiefly the recently founded Oratorians and the Jesuits. An interesting coincidence: the order founded by Loyola as The Society of Jesus to reconquer the countries lost to Protestantism came into action within a few months of Calvin’s parallel Discipline for those who would go forth to make Protestant converts.

To counter the Evangelicals’ PRIMITIVISM, Cardinal Baronius wrote a history of the early church, a classic that gained topical interest from the discovery of the catacombs, the underground passages in Rome in which the earliest persecuted Christians took refuge. The traces of their presence reinvigorated the worship of relics and strengthened the papacy by reminding the faithful that the church triumphed thanks to its first martyrs, including St. Peter, *at Rome*.

The resolve sealed at Trent recaptured a good deal of territory, notably

Poland. It succeeded because it was in large measure organized against INDIVIDUALISM. It enlisted the minds of men as zealous and capable as the first Evangelicals and readier than they to work in teams on a common plan. One of these, Ignacio de Loyola, a Spanish soldier, self-converted, who had a genius for administration, united a small band of seven (later ten) for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. When war on the Mediterranean with the Turks made this impossible, he thought of creating an active society for re-awakening faith and he began writing his *Spiritual Exercises*—rules for meditation and discipline. The *Exercises* are a masterpiece of applied psychology. Unlike earlier guides—indeed, contrary to their teaching—the rules called for the user to picture the topic of his thought or prayer, to see the incidents of Christ’s life, and at times to form an image of the self at these tasks. This “application of the senses” formed a group of missionaries at once spiritualized and in touch with the imaginings of common folk.

The popes after Trent were similarly zealous “gospel men” with large ideas. The Jesuit Order having been recognized at last by the Vatican, its members soon spread beyond the confines of Europe and began making Catholics of the people of the New World and the Far East, defending them, often, against the greed of their conquerors. At home, the cultural split in the new life was tangible: the Catholic effort to regain ground produced new works of architecture and the fine arts; the Protestant effort produced literature and large works of doctrine. The Calvinist courts in particular favored learning and Scotland started popular education. The Catholics put up or restored churches, commissioned altar pieces and paintings and sculptures of the Virgin and the saints—witness the abundance of Baroque art. The Protestants contributed *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the poems of Milton and Marvell, Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Living and Dying* and (as will appear) a spate of tracts, many of them in favor of rule by the people (265>).

At the same time as it cleansed and refurbished the ancestral fabric, the Council of Trent tied reform to narrow views; in this respect, it too went PRIMITIVE. The aim was to oppose Protestant errors: the result was to freeze Catholic beliefs at the point that European ideas had reached by 1500 or even earlier. Doing this was to go against tradition. The very meaning of that word

Perform the acts of faith and faith will come.

—LOYOLA, *EXERCISES* (1548)

**Assume a virtue, if you have it not, . . .
For use can almost change the stamp
of nature**

—HAMLET TO HIS MOTHER (1602)

**So with faith, if it does not lead to action, it is
in itself a lifeless thing.**

—THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. JAMES

**Only act in cold blood as if the thing in ques-
tion were real and it will become so knit with
habit and emotion that our interests in it will
be those which characterize belief.**

—WILLIAM JAMES, *PRINCIPLES OF
PSYCHOLOGY* (1890)

for the church had been that teachings not central to the faith changed over time, unhampered by the Bible, which was not yet in the hands of the people. The clergy being the only literates, they were the active, thoughtful public opinion whose debates and conclusions were the march of the Occidental mind.

This give-and-take maintained a common ground in large matters, but not close uniformity. Henry Adams's view of the happy 13C undisturbed by diversity is a Utopian retrospect. Adams ignored or forgot that Thomas Aquinas, the great synthesizer, was nearly excommunicated twice. An accusation of heresy was a way of starting an argument, and knowledge made headway.

Heretics are given us so that we might not remain in infancy. They question, there is discussion, and definitions are arrived at to make an organized faith.

—ST. AUGUSTINE

The ideas in the heads of 16C bishops were obviously well in advance of those held as true by the contemporaries of Charlemagne in the 9th. Now in the 16th, instead of an intellectual free-for-all and gradual enlightenment, the church decided to arrest the cur-

rent of thought. This stand was in effect dictated by their Protestant enemies. One could say that in roundabout fashion, it was these Bible-ridden revolutionists who got Galileo condemned for his astronomy. If the literalism of the Word had not been adopted at Trent to show that Catholics too revered Scripture, there would have been no need to make science conform to Genesis. By commanding belief in matters not essentially religious or moral, Trent laid the ground for that "warfare of science and religion" which is still being waged.^o It has kept making unbelievers, or rather—since it forces a choice—it has deprived many of the chance to believe.

The widespread discontent among western Catholics as our century ends—the public wrangling among bishops, the desertion of clerics and lagging recruitment of priests, the "liberal" doctrines sprung up in South America or taught at Catholic universities in defiance of papal decrees—all have their ultimate source in the success of the Tridentine reforms. Yet it would be a mistake to think that these actions and reactions are part of a continued trend toward a secular world ruled by science. On the contrary, divisions within the churches suggest a renewed search for the transcendent. Though today in the West the schools and governments, the press and the habits of public life, are no longer blended with religion, more and more demands are expressed that they should do so once again.

And more than demands: efforts to reconquer souls and institutions. Fundamentalisms are vocal everywhere; religious issues and personalities occupy the media as never before. Noting headlines at random, one learns that Protestantism is making converts in Brazil and in France; that the Church of England, now outnumbered by the English Catholics, has redefined Hell to eliminate its "sadistic tortures"; that the Reverend Sun Myung

Moon is touring Europe lecturing on Evolution, and has married 36,000 couples in Seoul; that Satanism is a fad among the young in more than one country, while other cults, meditative, Eastern, televised, or self-immolating proliferate.

Meantime, the Virgin Mary appears in sophisticated American suburbs and crowds gather to await her second appearance. More orthodox events also attract notice. The annual appeal of the Taizé order of monks in Poland brings together some 70,000 young people from all over Europe to “restore a soul to the mechanized world.” The pope’s visits are attended by hundreds of thousands, new translations of the Bible are published, and science is attacked on intellectual grounds by writers free of religious motives. Lastly, Islam—or part of it—is again fighting the West, and where it conquers it is much more intolerant than it was in the 16C. It is plain that the Protestant revolution has not ended in diffuse indifference to faith, nor has the Catholic self-reformation settled doctrine with finality.

*
* * *

The Jesuits’ activity impinged on culture in other ways than the strictly devotional. In undertaking to deal with the young, the stubborn, and the hesitant souls, the Order developed casuistry, penetrated domestic life, and acquired a virtual monopoly of education. “Casuistry” and “Jesuitical” have become synonyms for deviousness, thus obscuring an important subject. The famous casuists of the 16C, such as the Spanish Mariana and the Anglican Jeremy Taylor, were men of high moral and intellectual caliber. Casuistry is the theory of *cases*: the casuist shows how to apply the general rules that govern conduct to the particular moral problem—exactly what the judge does with a statute when he decides a case. All the recent codes of conduct for lawyers, physicians, and other professionals require casuistry for their application. Casuistry is also the mental operation of the moral person when he or she faces an ethical dilemma. It is a difficult art.

The sad fate of Jesuit casuistry came about when in the course of making the old faith attractive once more, some writers set down ingenious ways of evading plain but painful duties. Such books, full of tantalizing, often sexual, cases (as in psychoanalytic literature) became popular as guides to *misconduct*. Before psychiatrists and magazine articles on psychology, counselors were needed and easily found among the Jesuits. The well-disciplined Order supplied father confessors who found a permanent role in great houses. In

Popular interest in matters spiritual, so much a feature of life in the 1990s, has provided publishers with a ready audience for all sorts of books about angels, miracles, and visions of an afterlife. It has meant a market for more serious works, too, like studies of Jesus and most lately of the Virgin Mary.

—*THE NEW YORK TIMES*, AUGUST 17, 1996

more modest settings, as “directors of conscience,” they were regularly consulted by the members of the family, most often the women. Molière’s *Tartuffe* depicts the arrangement. In time, it led to such abuses that it was denounced on both moral and intellectual grounds (219; 345>).

Meanwhile, by care and thought and continually revised methods, the Jesuits shone as schoolmasters—unsurpassed in the history of education. They taught secular subjects as well as church doctrine and did so with unexampled understanding and kindness toward their pupils. Their success was due to the most efficient form of teacher-training ever seen. They knew that born teachers are as scarce as true poets and that the next best cannot be made casually out of indifferent materials, so they devised a preparation that included exhaustive learning and a severe winnowing of the unfit at every phase of a long apprenticeship.

The University of Paris opposed the Jesuits not merely because they were from abroad but because they competed with those in salaried posts at the University by offering education free. It is not hard for firmly united, clever, and courageous men to do great things in the world. Ten such men affect 100,000.

—BURCKHARDT, *JUDGMENTS ON HISTORY*^o

The Jesuits set up schools by the score. In mid-17C Europe there were more schools and pupils than in the mid-19C. Indeed, there soon was complaint of too many schools for the population. All likely youths, rich or poor, were given the means to attend, and the merits of the system were shortly seen in the galaxy of brilliant minds that it produced. From Descartes to Voltaire and beyond, a good many philosophers

and scientists were educated by the Jesuits. Some of these bright pupils went on to undermine the dogmas they had so well learned; they became leaders of the 18C Enlightenment, to whom the church was the “infamous thing” they must crush (361>).

The Good Letters

SO FAR IN THIS STORY, events and ideas have suggested three themes: **PRIMITIVISM**, **INDIVIDUALISM**, and **EMANCIPATION**. The first and last, audible in Luther's proffer of Christian liberty and based on what might be called the churchlessness of the gospels, succeeded in putting an end to the West's unity of belief. It also foreshadowed the third theme, **INDIVIDUALISM**, not as a political or social right, but as an assumption behind the proliferation of sects, themselves a result of the individual's untrammelled relation to God.

Side by side with this revolutionary idea, another of equal power was also at work strengthening the awareness and the claims of the individual. This was Humanism, to which passing reference has been made in characterizing figures important in the revolution. Humanism, too, grew out of concern with the past, but not a primitive past; on the contrary, a civilized one, the recovery of which came to mean not a purer religion but a more secular world.

The name Humanist has a familiar aura but commonly conveys no well-defined affiliation. We heard Luther call Erasmus an atheist because he was a humanist and condemn humanist pursuits as frivolous, while he himself regretted his lack of proficiency in classical Latin, which his protégé Melancthon had mastered like any good humanist. And Calvin, we saw, was trained humanistically without turning atheist. The appellation obviously had several connotations at the dawn of our era and has acquired more since. Various adjectives have been added to it: secular, theistic, naturalistic, and even esthetic Humanism.°

To make things more complicated, the name is associated with that of Renaissance, which is also an elastic term. One meets the latter in reading about many things—painting, diplomacy, or the geniuses who possess more than one talent—Renaissance men. And both its meaning and its date are in permanent dispute. But this confusion is not hopeless. If one is willing to go back to origins, one sees the usual growth of a new cultural interest, a change of direction in purposes and feelings. Those origins take us back some 150 years before the Modern Era.

Oh century! Oh letters! It is a joy to be alive.

—ULRICH VON HUTTEN TO PIRCKHEIMER,
SECRETARY TO THE EMPEROR (1518)

The term *humanist* was first applied by German scholars of the early 19C to writers who in the 14C and 15C rejected parts of the immediate past in favor

of the culture they perceived in the classics of ancient Rome. They were particularly keen about the Latin style of these classics.

The label Humanism is odd—the *ism* of being human—but it is not arbitrary: it originally described the style of the ancients: *litterae humaniores*, the more human letters, meaning a literature less abstract than medieval philosophy and expressed in a more elegant grammar and concise vocabulary. These qualities defined what the humanists liked to call the “good letters.” By comparison, the prose of the medieval scholastics was barbaric and fit only for discussing theology. It was far from ignoring Man, but it was logic-chopping and it linked all human concerns to the hereafter. Such was the animus of certain gifted writers born in Italy in the first third of the 14C, notably Petrarch, Salutati, and Boccaccio, whose disciples made humanism the culture of the next centuries.

Their negative view was unfair; the Humanists owed more to the past than they knew or acknowledged—the typical attitude of innovators. But since their positive views have shaped western thought and action to this day, the conception of *humanitas* that came out of the preoccupation with style wants looking at. We still speak of “the humanities” and keep trembling at the danger they are in, apparently their permanent condition. But we are not always sure of what they are or why so called. Are they just college subjects or something besides?

For the original Humanists, the ancient classics depicted a civilization that dealt with the affairs of the world in a man-centered way. Those books—poems and plays, histories and biographies, moral and social philosophy—were for the ancients guides to life, important in themselves, rather than subordinate to an overriding scheme that put off human happiness to the day of judgment. The theme of SECULARISM emerges from this outlook.

Humanitas, that is, the studies it involved, opened a vista on the goals that could be reached on earth: individual self-development, action rather than pious passivity, a life in which reason and will can be used both to improve worldly conditions and to observe the lessons that nature holds for the thoughtful. The Humanists were scholars, but they had no use for an ivory tower. With this vision in mind, it is not surprising that Cicero became the humanists’ culture hero. A writer of superb prose, an orator and statesman, a moral philosopher, and the last defender of Republican Rome, he had all the virtues and talents of the ideal Humanist, except that of able warrior. His “imperishable fame” perished only when physical science began to drive Latin out of the curriculum around 1890. Until then, which is to say for 500 years,

ideas and catchphrases from Cicero's speeches and writings, together with the works of other Romans, filled the minds of educated western man and woman after bedeviling the young in school. The structure of thought and argument in the western languages has been influenced by Cicero, and the oration long flourished as a literary form (51>).

Besides Cicero's works, Livy's patriotic history of Rome and its wars with Carthage; the *Annals* and *Germania* of Tacitus (<9); the tragedies and moral essays of Seneca; the comedies of Plautus and Terence; the poems of Virgil, Ovid, Lucretius, Catullus, and Horace; and—lone specimen—Pliny's encyclopedic natural history—made up the portrait of a complete culture that seemed to its 14C devotees grander and far more highly civilized than the one they lived in.

Why no mention of the Greeks? To be sure, Plato and Aristotle, long used by the Scholastics in their speculations, were important to the humanists, and Homer, Thucydides, and Demosthenes as well. But learning Greek in order to read these authors came late—hardly before the Turks captured Constantinople, capital of the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire at the mid-point of the 15C. It was then that learned refugees from that city came to Rome and made a living by teaching Greek. But reading Greek was never so general an accomplishment. Humanism as the common possession of the intellectual class meant old Rome—witness a custom of the English Parliament: a member could quote a Latin tag to round out an argument and he was laughed at if he uttered a false quantity; but to quote Greek was a faux pas—it might not be understood by everybody, Whig or Tory.

Humanists saw Greece through Roman eyes anyway. The vivid awareness and worship of Greece—the Parthenon, Pericles, the Venus of Milo—came later in our era (514>), and different conceptions of Greece have flourished in successive periods. But throughout, the highly educated were supposed to have mastered both the ancient languages, and the clergy must know Hebrew in addition. It is a noteworthy feature of 20C culture that for the first time in over a thousand years its educated class is not expected to be at least bilingual.°

The new degree of Bachelor of Science does not guarantee that the holder knows any science. It does guarantee that he does not know any Latin.

—DEAN BRIGGS OF HARVARD COLLEGE
(c. 1900)

*
* *
*

The path between the onset of the good letters and the modern Humanist as freethinker or simply as scholar is circuitous but unbroken. If we look for what is common to the Humanists over the centuries we find two things: a body of accepted authors and a method of carrying on study and

debate. The two go together with the belief that the best guides to the good life are Reason and Nature. Finding this assumption all-important, some moderns have carped at the early Humanists for fussing over grammar and words, but it is hard to see how they could have produced scholarly editions of the ancient works that they valued so highly without first mastering the minutiae of language. In any case, what is the point of saying about innovators that they should have done what later comers were able to do after the ground had been cleared for them?

As for the Humanist method, it is the one still in universal use. Its conventions are commonplace everywhere: in government, business, the weekly magazines, and even in schoolwork—who has escaped “research”? who dares ignore exact quotation and date, consulting previous work, citing sources, listing bibliography, and sporting that badge of candor, the footnote?°

The accepted authors have not been as stable, though drawn from the same pool. Cicero’s rise and fall has been mentioned; with every shift of mood new names emerge from relative neglect or oust others from the top places. The new choices point to a recurrent cultural need that can be described as “elements that are wanted,” because lacking at that moment. The freshly admired figures correspond to that felt need. The passing of a generation usually ends a battle and installs those who urged new heroes, who deserve what is amusingly called lasting fame. Today, the whole Occidental canon is under attack by many people who find it out of tune, useless, although they could not readily say who is in it.

In the 15th and 16C the continuing enthusiasm for the ancients was reinforced by the feeling that the inherited culture was dissolving and here was a storehouse of ideas and attitudes with which to rebuild. It was like going up to the attic and polishing up semi-discarded treasures. The names of authors, the titles of their books, the topics treated were fresh, not the old bores; they formed a field of discovery all untouched, a mine to exploit for those ambitious of literary fame. Hence the passionate search for old manuscripts to save from loss, to compare and edit. Scholars traveled widely to ransack castles and monasteries; wealthy amateurs sent agents to buy in Constantinople and the Greek cities. The monks had copied and recopied the old texts and housed them for a millennium, but they had regarded them in another light. To be sure, as early as the 12C when Frederick II of Hohenstaufen had held court at Naples, he had shown a true humanist interest, extending even to Arabic works, but he was a lone exception.

To explain the curious fact that the Middle Ages valued the ancients enough to keep their works copied but did not breed Humanists calls for a Theory of Aspect. It would state than an object or idea is rarely seen in the

round. Like a mountain, it presents a variety of faces. Moved by an ulterior purpose, observers take a few of these for the whole. This is a cultural generality. It accounts for the surprising differences in the value put on the same artist or thinker at different times and for the different pasts depicted by different historians. This partiality should not be surprising; it is a familiar fact of life: each individual “takes” only some elements of experience, and that spontaneous choice governs tastes, career, estimates of worth, and the feel of life itself.

For the early Humanists, the aspects that shone out in the works of antiquity were the beauty of the language and the novel features of a vanished civilization. Both gave rise to a new sense, the sense of history, which may be defined as the simultaneous perception of difference and similarity between past and present. But had the medievals no historical awareness? They thought of themselves as descendants of the Roman Empire; they venerated the first Christian emperor, Constantine, and his feudal inheritor Charlemagne. They read Virgil and thought that one or another of the Trojan heroes in his poem had founded this or that western nation. That same poem was also used as a means of foretelling the future, by opening it at random and reading some one line on the page. For Virgil had been a magician. All this is a clue to the Middle Ages’ attitude toward history. They merged time and space indiscriminately. They mingled fact and legend and miracle, and being preoccupied with eternity, they “took” sameness and continuity as more real than development and change—hence, no history in the modern sense (234>).

With the usual pride of advanced thinkers, the Humanists saw their repossession of a great past as a Renaissance—a rebirth of civilization itself. The immediate past was “Gothic” in language, thought, and sensibility. This boast of rebirth was accepted without demur until our own century. When contrary-minded researchers, tired of hearing praises of Renaissance Humanism, tackled the Middle Ages with gusto, they unearthed evidence to show that many of the achievements credited to the Renaissance had a root in the previous period, including certain scientific ideas. So if any renaissance ever did occur, it was in the 12C, leading to the high medieval civilization of the 13th.

The dispute is not one of those that can be settled; judgment depends on how the viewer takes the unquestioned facts. But it can also be held that there is no need to “take” sides. In the first place, the traditional Renaissance is like a movable feast. The Italian Petrarch in the 14C is deemed the first full-blooded Humanist. “Renaissance” painting is the great achievement of the 15C. Erasmus, Ariosto, Tasso, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and the *Pléiade* poets in France are all labeled Renaissance writers, and they belong to the 16C. So does Renaissance music. As we saw, Erasmus, arriving in England in 1497,

was glad to find that English scholars were now abreast of “the good letters.” In short, the cultural features of the so-called Renaissance moved north and west from Italy during a cultural lag of some two and a half centuries.

These dates can serve to calm the dispute: since the Modern Era is seen as beginning around 1500 and Petrarch is seen as the earliest Humanist, the Renaissance is a going concern in the 14C and 15C, which is to say before the Modern Era, and thus part of the medieval, its germs present in the late Middle Ages, its fruitfulness intensified in the early modern era. So viewed, the black-and-white contrast between eras disappears: it was an illusion of the innovators, serviceable to them as self-encouragement. To us, it is tenable only if we make comparisons over a wide gap, say between 1250 and 1550—Aquinas with Erasmus, or the two towers of Chartres cathedral, built 200 years apart. In this perspective, the inquiring reader can safely enjoy both Burckhardt’s *History of Civilization in the Renaissance* and his challenger Huizinga’s *Waning of the Middle Ages*—two masterpieces of cultural history, two visions that complement each other in spite of partial disagreement.

Since the passage of time always brings on difference, “the” Humanist is an abstract figure that must be made concrete by examples. Nuances in an evolving ideal and the turbulent culture then appear together as they should. One must obviously begin with the veneration for the ancients and their language as recorded in the life and work of

Petrarch

The son of a Florentine notary, young Francesco, born in 1304, began by studying law, but being left impoverished after his father’s political exile to southern France, he became a priest. By his 30th year he was famous as a poet—so famous that in a revival of the ancient custom of crowning a hero with laurel leaves, a Roman senator crowned him “poet laureate.” Petrarch gave thanks in a Latin oration on a text by Virgil. But this Latinity was only part of his renown. Petrarch’s name today evokes that of Laura, to whom the poet

wrote sonnets and odes for years, and these were in Italian. Incidentally, he made no attempts at intimacy; indeed, so varied was the purely literary tribute that some scholars classify the poems as pro-Laura, anti-Laura, and neutral—deconstruction with a vengeance.

**Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch’s
wife,
He would have written sonnets all his life?**

—BYRON IN *DON JUAN*

This early Humanist ritual of laureateship, somewhat dimmed, is still with us. As everybody knows, it persists in England, where it is a lifetime post whose holder is expected to celebrate great events in verse. The harvest of poetry has been small. In the United States since 1985 a series of incumbents

have held the title for one year each, with the modest expectation that their elevation will publicize the importance of literature. Petrarch's celebration at Rome signifies much more: it means that the aura of the Roman past was in the air, intimations of what was to come. It is in his combining "elements that were wanted" and adding one or two that Petrarch is a new man, who inspired imitation without end.

The one thing of monetary value that he inherited from his father was a manuscript of Cicero. The work filled his mind with ancient facts and ideas; a trip to Rome fixed his vision. For there he saw and marveled at the antiquities, tangible remains of a culture once alive and complete. It may have helped the vision that the city just then was no longer papal Rome: a schism in the church had exiled the popes to Avignon, where Petrarch grew up. The pope's court there gave the young man a distaste for intrigue, which made him refuse official posts—even university rectorships—all his life.

Instead, he set himself to earn his keep as a writer, though not, of course, by the sale of his works. He was at first part of the household of the Colonna family; then, when famous, he served as envoy to various princes. Diplomacy in his day was occasional, not a permanent exchange of resident ambassadors, as it became in the 16C. In the mid-14th, someone with a ready choice of words—Latin words—was despatched to make a formal speech on the matter at issue. Petrarch excelled in the required rhetoric, and though his speeches rarely produced results, his distinguished presence flattered the recipient prince and his words were appreciated by an invited audience as high entertainment.

To earn a more than passing repute as a poet, Petrarch started an epic in Latin on the deeds of the Roman hero Scipio, the commander-in-chief in the second war against Carthage—hence the title *Africa* for the epic. It was never finished, partly because Petrarch never gained ease in handling the classic metres—any more than he mastered Greek, though he tried more than once. This falling short of the later Humanists' panoply accounts for one modern scholar's quaint description of him as only "the vanguard of the changed emphasis."

During a wide tour of Europe, Petrarch found another manuscript of Cicero—the letters to his friends. This familiar style he did master and popularized. At the same time, his poems in Italian—by no means all sonnets or all addressed to Laura—he fashioned into a shapely quasi narrative work, a kind of allusive autobiography. This was new. And it was also an expression of his intense interest in himself: "I am unlike anybody I know." He declared that art is an individual matter, not something within the reach of all professionals. "Everyone should write in his own style." The theme to note here is SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS. It is allied to INDIVIDUALISM but it differs from it in being not a social and political condition but a mental state. One can be in prison,

individuality all but submerged, and yet be acutely self-conscious. Individualism has limits imposed by the coexistence of many other individuals; self-consciousness has none. Over the centuries it has dug ever deeper into the ego, with no boundary in sight.

Another singularity in Petrarch's life was that he climbed a high hill in southern France in order to admire the view.^o If it was done before him, it was not recorded. Nature had been endlessly discussed, but as a generality, not as *this* landscape. As for Petrarch's nurture of his unique self, it included changing his name, for a purpose that can only be called esthetic. Petrarch was born Francesco di Petrarco, but with a poet's ear he decided that it was not a euphonious run of syllables. Cutting a *c*, adding an *r* to lengthen the middle *a*, and changing *o* to *a* at the end to make *Petrarca* (in Latin *poeta* ends in *a*) was as deft a piece of work as making a good verse.

Whether we wish to leave some memory of ourselves to Posterity by thinking or writing something and thus to arrest the flight of days and extend this short span of life, we must flee and spend the little time that is left us in solitude.

—PETRARCH, *ON THE SOLITARY LIFE*

Nearly the whole of Petrarch's verse and prose is in effect autobiography. He wrote an explicit one entitled *Letter to Posterity*, and his letters to friends recount what he has done, while his poems tell what he has thought and

felt. Introspection followed by self-portraiture is linked in Petrarch with another novelty, the express desire for eternal fame. It too is a revival of an ancient habit, and not the kind of passion that one would readily confess to in an age that still desired eternal bliss. Since Petrarch, every poet has followed him (and Horace) by appealing to Posterity and promising eternal renown to the patron of the work through its being tied to the author's own.

*
* * *

Although in the Laura poems Petrarch strikes the personal note, and the emotions are fresh and vividly described, we are not given the kind of detail that brings out a unique character such as we find (say) in Meredith's *Modern Love*. "Character" is a later invention (135; 140>). It was no doubt Petrarch's simpler notion of self that made him so imitable. After him and without end, Europe has been flooded with lovelornery in sonnet form. The species that we owe to Petrarch is now regarded as if the command: "thou shalt stop at fourteen lines" had been uttered on Mount Sinai. But it was a happy turn of practice that established it; no ancient model existed, and in Petrarch's day sonnets—verses to be *sounded*, to be sung—were of various lengths. The now traditional length is just right for a small oration—exposition, development, and conclusion. And that classical form, so closely studied and practiced by

the Humanists, has remained a pattern that governs western creations, from public speaking to poetry, drama, prose, and the symphony (419>).

True, the span of fourteen lines does not suit all languages equally well, which is why (for instance) French poets have used the form sparingly. But sonnet sequences like Petrarch's or Shakespeare's make possible a narrative-by-episode; the poet need not versify any connective matter as he must in an epic. Rather, he anticipates by five or six hundred years the technique of film and television. Meredith found he needed sixteen lines for the sonnets of *Modern Love* and his great story is none the worse for this return to the freedom of choice abolished by Petrarch.

The imitators, with their exaggerated sighs of love and cries of despair addressed to an idol in female shape have repeatedly brought the love lyric into disrepute. Germany at one time went Petrarch-mad and during such high tides of production Petrarchist became a term of abuse. But the genre always rebounded, and not solely to express love; it has conveyed passion allied to descriptions of nature or to moral reflections and political opinions.

Petrarch himself showed that a poet bent on the contemplative life could, at the shock of an event, turn political. A commoner named Cola di Rienzi led an uprising in 1347 and "restored the Roman republic"—for a few months. (Wagner's early opera uses his name and story.) Petrarch, then in his early forties, was overjoyed at this revival of another classical institution, though he did not give up hobnobbing with the tyrants who ruled the several Italian cities; his ideal remained untouched by the facts. Like his predecessor Dante and other writers yet to come, he longed for a united Italy. His "Ode to Italy" and other pieces foretold glories of the kind he read about in Livy.

This utopian wish was another Humanist departure: educated men and women began to revere the Roman republic instead of the empire that had so deeply stirred the Middle Ages. Cicero fighting to save a free government became the model citizen, even to the loyal subjects of 16C princes. Caesar was the hated usurper and Brutus a hero for killing him—witness Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Like the value put on the judgment of Posterity, this excitement about political ideals shows the importance that the Humanist temper attached to worldly things.

But one must not overlook opposites and contradictions. Humanists were not indifferent to religion or wanting to replace Christianity with paganism. Those called Humanists today may rule out the divine and make Man the measure of all things, but Petrarch, for one, remained deeply religious. All secular works, he said, took second place to the gospel; he had a cult for Saint Augustine and late in life wrote a tract on Contempt for the World. It was a sort of confession of sins paralleling the anti-Laura poems. He even attacked the followers of Averroës, the Arab physician-philosopher, for being materialists and infidels. One can imagine Petrarch in old age retiring to a Humanist

convent, had there been such a thing. All he wanted to do then was cultivate the good letters so as to “shut out the reality of my own times.”

What may mislead about the Humanists' genuine faith is that, after Petrarch, writers of all tendencies mingle the pagan mythology, history, and geography with the Christian. Milton, the firm believer, is a prime example: his poems are filled with nymphs and ancient myths. Poets took pleasure in using a set of fresh words; the names of the gods, heroes, places, and deeds formed a treasury of new images and sounds. Humanists freely refer to the “divine Plato,” the “divine Seneca”; some use Jove to mean God or Jehovah, or call it Providence when a god in Homer protects a warrior—all this without a thought of being freethinkers, heretics, or atheists. From reading the ancients the conviction grew that some of them, by their thoughts and lives, were almost Christians. We saw Erasmus invoking “Saint Socrates.” Many believed that Plato failed to be a Christian only because Revelation had not yet occurred. Seneca the Roman Stoic was revered for his austere ethics and his conception of a universe obedient to a single god, remote though Seneca thought him.

After this merger of traditions it is not surprising to see the Renaissance Humanists followed in the 17C by thinkers who professed themselves Stoics without abandoning their equal claim to being Christians. These things being so, it seems bad history to keep referring today to “our Judaeo-Christian heritage.” Pagan or Graeco-Roman ought to be added to the phrase, not to mark a separate strand but as a fused element like the other two. To cite but one item, the endless effort to change society for the better, which is a characteristic of the last five centuries, comes from the Graeco-Roman tradition. To say this is to point again to the presence of Humanism throughout the Modern Era.

*
* * *

Between Petrarch and Erasmus the development of Humanist knowledge and taste took place mainly in Italy. Its great cities and universities were magnets that drew adventurous minds from other countries, just as Wittenberg and Lyon, Strasbourg and Geneva successively drew partisans of the new creeds. Nor was it learning and atmosphere alone that brought the talented young and the inquisitive tourist: the new painting and sculpture and their amazing new methods, the ancient ruins and the new churches and palaces were also powerful attractions. Still other minds felt the pull of Italy's advanced ideas in science, law, and business methods, to which may be added a new regard for elegance in cookery and table manners (183>).

Returning home, the visitor spread the news of this many-sided civilizing influence, which other countries acknowledged in the catchphrase “Italy the

mother of the arts.” It should have been: “Italy the mother of all high culture.” This dominant role is recorded in the vocabulary we still use about the arts, to say nothing of all the Italian names in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, English and foreign. What would we do without such technical terms as sonata, rondo, aria da capo, folio, octavo, impasto, chiaroscuro, terza rima, intermezzo, solo, tremolo, ’cello, prima donna, bravo, and many more? Italian remained the obligatory language for men of letters down to fairly recent times: they must read Boccaccio, Tasso, and Ariosto in the original, part of “the canon” and inspirers of operas, the genre itself being an Italian invention and for a time a monopoly (159; 174>).

For all these reasons, during the 17th and 18C the young well-to-do from elsewhere must make the Grand Tour, of which the peak experience was to enjoy, under a tutor’s informed guidance, the art and easy life of Rome and Florence, possibly of Naples and Venice. Milton’s tour was decisive for his vocation, and it has been plausibly suggested that *Paradise Lost* owes much to the Italian author of *Adamo Caduto* (The Fall of Adam).° As for those aspiring to be artists, it was imperative that they go and “finish” themselves at the source, Italy. France and the United States still maintain for them under the name of Academy residences in Rome.

That the rest of Europe freely conceded its own barbarism and praised Italy was not a wholly poised judgment. It partook of the social climber’s repudiation of his origins and eagerness for acquiring abroad the right tastes and behavior. To be fashionable in some particular foreign way has been a recurrent phenomenon in the west. After Italy, it was Spain that radiated light; then France imposed its ways and later went Anglophile, not once but twice (361; 498>). After a short-lived Germanism in England and France, the Orient, and last the United States have been the irresistible model, followed even when denounced.

Almost always, though not in that first Italian example, these fads come in the wake of the political or economic might of the admired nation. This is curious, since it is artists and intellectuals, noted for being above such mundane realities, who generate these cultural infatuations.

At the beginning of the successive “ages of the Renaissance” north and west of Italy, when Italian poetry, drama, and prose fiction were taken as models, together with the Humanist scholarly methods, attention to the writ-

They have no concern for music or rhetoric or the metrical art. Oratory and poetry are almost unknown. For them, all study in logic is futile disputation. You rarely find anyone who owns the works of Aristotle and other philosophers. The students at the new university devote themselves largely to pleasure and are avid for food and wine, nor are they restrained by any discipline. Day and night they roam about inflicting injuries on citizens and their heads are completely turned by the shameless women.

—POPE PIUS II ABOUT VIENNA, C. 1458

ten word affected enlightened opinion on law, history, politics, and religion. Establishing a text by comparing sources, verifying dates, weighing evidence and witnesses' credibility, while also analyzing usage, impressed on the European mind the effect of the passage of time: documents began to be read critically; oral traditions lost authority unless confirmed. The age of indispensable literacy had begun. The first fruit of this organized skepticism was the demonstration by Lorenzo Valla that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery. This document, purporting to be from the hand of the first Christian emperor, gave the popes their territorial possessions, thus adding the worldly to the spiritual power. Valla showed that the language and allusions belonged to a later age than the emperor's.

This proof gave comfort to the Reformers: their enemy the pope was a usurper on earth as he was in heaven. And although the Evangelicals looked down on the Humanists' pursuit of the telltale word, pious students of Scripture had to use that same method themselves. The many new editions and translations of the Bible could not have been made without it. These works embodied the primary criticism of Scripture. Soon followed what is known as the "higher criticism" of the Testaments: questioning the substance after questioning the words (359>). This discipline is still at work today, though with a freedom that would have petrified the pioneers. The specialized journals discuss such questions as whether King David ever existed and "Did Sarah Have a Seminal Emission?"¹⁰ In general, 16C scholarship strengthened the Protestant idea that the gospel, not the church, was the fount of doctrine. It is a Humanist principle that if you want to know the truth, go to the sources, not the commentators. In short, Humanism and Reform, without being allies, converged in one point toward the same goal. This fact would seem enough to justify the usual phrase "Renaissance and Reformation" to label the culture of the 16C.

*
* *
*

The leading Humanists did not, of course, share the Evangelical passion. The Renaissance popes, Humanists by taste if not by works, despised the Protestants as bigots and heretics. Were the Humanists in fact atheists? If not, what was their faith? Erasmus, we know, was sure he was a good Christian. Petrarch went from faithful to devout, first wooing the world then wanting to give it up. The difference between these two representative positions is one of theology, of ideology. Each is based on different parts of the gospel: Christ came to forgive sins as a spur to living the right life; this is a moral and social concern. He also preached giving up the world, a prerequisite to the soul's salvation. Can one follow both commands?

The truth that religion and morality are at odds with each other is rarely acknowledged, probably because the two desires are equally strong in the human breast, reflecting there the respective demands of society and of the self. The dogma that a repentant sinner—say, the Prodigal Son—is to be cherished ahead of the merely moral character has great appeal. Like Luther, popular opinion prefers the rogue, once he is tamed, to those dull clods who have resisted temptation. But if adopted by most people as a rule of life, the sentiment would make for anything but a peaceful society.

The Italian Humanists witnessed one fit of Evangelical zeal and it was enough. Toward the end of the 15C the monk Girolamo Savonarola roused the Florentines to a high pitch of devotion that led to the famous “bonfire of the vanities.” Such a high ideal tension cannot be sustained by a whole community for very long, and when this one broke, the prophet was declared a heretic and burned at the stake with public approval. Savonarola had been too literal—too Evangelical—in using the words of Christ to convert the masses.

Good Christian Humanists were moral beings of the conventional sort, but their trained minds wanted something more: a metaphysics that would reformulate or at least parallel in classical terms the Catholic theology. Most of them found it in Plato. He had taught that human beings are in a cave with their backs to the entrance and looking at the inner wall, which reflects dimly the reality outside. Interpreted, this means that the senses give an imperfect copy of the eternal forms of Being. These are the proper object of human attention. By steady effort, the individual can raise his sight from the love of earthly things to the love of eternal beauty, which consists of those pure forms. Such is the Platonist’s grace and salvation.

Perhaps because this prospect is somewhat dry and abstract, a number of these Neo-Platonists added to it various beliefs from the Cabbala and the traditions of “white magic.” Plato, thus turned into a theologian, had the advantage of getting rid of Aristotle, the great buttress of scholastic theology, now rejected. Aristotle was a physicist, biologist, social scientist, and aesthetician. His system gave matter basic importance. He taught that wealth, friends, and comfort were part of the good life and prerequisites of virtue; for every ideal possibility rests on a natural (material) base. Though Plato’s ladder to eternal forms was closer to Christian aspiration, a minority among Humanists,

May not a man be a Christian who cannot explain how the nativity of the Son differs from the procession of the Holy Spirit? If I believe in the Trinity in Unity, I want no arguments. If I do not believe, I shall not be convinced by reason. The sum of religion is peace, which can only be when definitions are as few as possible and opinion is left free on many subjects. Our present problems are said to be waiting for the next Ecumenical Council. Better let them wait till we see God face to face.

—ERASMUS (1522)

attracted by the new findings of science, still adhered to the Aristotelian philosophy, especially after it became known in its original texts, another fruit of the new scholarship.

From then on, the two parties—are they temperaments?—have carried on this same debate over Matter and Idea, but not on equal terms. In successive periods one outlook tends to predominate and to permeate every intellectual activity, including natural science itself, where the opposite of Materialism takes the name Vitalism (665>). This seesaw has been greatly productive; the stimulating effect of toppling the orthodoxy is a cultural constant. [The book to read is *Renaissance Thought* by Paul Oskar Kristeller.]

For natures inclined to mysticism, Plato (and his later expounder Porphyry, who showed how to lift one's gaze from sensuous to abstract beauty) satisfied a strong desire akin to the Reformers' for a pure faith. Michelangelo, for example, whose hand was subdued to matter like any ditch digger's, valued his works

**No mortal thing enthrall these longing eyes
When perfect peace in thy fair face I found;
But far within, where all is holy ground,
My soul felt Love, her comrade of the skies**

—MICHELANGELO, FROM *SONNET 52*

not for their artistic merit, as we do, but for the ideal beauty that he put into them and that, for him, made their materiality disappear. His love sonnets worship the same ineffable entity in a woman, Vittoria Colonna, to whom they are addressed.

To all this the materialist opposition says that the ideal does not exist apart from the natural, the abstract from the concrete. It is too bad that in popular use "Platonic love" means only absence of sexual relations. That typical reduction of an important idea prevents one from using the term conveniently to denote a recurrent striving in occidental culture, the longing for the Pure. Individuals and movements, not all rooted in religion or metaphysics, have repeatedly proclaimed their pursuit or their achievement of pure love, pure thought, pure form in art (622; 639–40>). It is a yearning akin to PRIMITIVISM.

*

* *

The Humanist fusion of faith and philosophy had a by-product which deserves to be called "toleration by absentmindedness." A church hierarchy thoroughly Humanistified is able to appreciate the varieties of religious experience and, short of extremes such as Savonarola's, tends to permit variations. After all, a good many of those ardent Platonists were in holy orders and felt easy about their role. Lorenzo Valla provides a good example: when he exposed the Donation of Constantine, he feared sanctions in Rome and fled to Naples, where like a true Humanist he opened a school of oratory. But even at that early date, the pope forgave him and found him a secretaryship.

Favoring neither Plato nor Aristotle, Valla has even been classed among Luther's forerunners.^o His chief interest, history, led him to translate Herodotus and Thucydides into Latin, for most readers were as yet unable to read Greek. This reminds us that for a good while after the Humanist awakening, half the ancient world and its fund of wisdom were still a vague or second-hand reality. The entry of Greek into minds overflowing with Cicero's Latin was a dramatic event and another Italian scoop. With Greek came Plato in the guise just described, and through the career and works of Valla's contemporary

Marsilio Ficino

we see at close range how lives and culture mesh. Chief mover of the Florentine Academy, inspirer of poets and statesmen, teacher of the legendary Pico della Mirandola, Ficino was acclaimed in his time as supreme. Then he was unread for a long time and he remains largely untranslated.

He was six years old about the mid-15C when the Byzantine emperor came to Rome with one of his scholars, the 80-year-old Geminthus Pletho. They were seeking an alliance against the Turks, who were advancing upon Constantinople, the Byzantine capital. A reconciliation of the Greek with the Roman church might also be discussed but it was not concluded. Pletho lectured in Rome and startled his hearers by showing a firsthand knowledge of Plato, who was still generally thought an infidel. The Byzantines themselves were deemed schismatics: they did not accept the Holy Ghost as an equal member of the Trinity, they celebrated Easter on the wrong date, and gave other signs of wrong-headedness.

Accordingly, when Pletho talked Plato, the lecturer was suspected of being the Devil come to seduce the faithful. But Cosimo de' Medici, the wealthiest banker and political boss of Florence, took a chance and invited Pletho to dinner. At the end of it Cosimo decided to found a school of Greek thought. The idea simmered a while, and four years after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the school opened. Cosimo called it *Accademia* in honor of the place where Plato had taught in Athens, a grove honoring the hero Academos. Hence the modern term for schools, universities, and official guardians of learning, while "academic" has had a checkered career in fine art and social opinion. (But *Academe* is not a synonym of academy: it is a variant spelling of *Academos*.) Cosimo's institution was a self-selected group of scholars who met regularly to keep abreast of one another's findings. It needed a director, and Cosimo appointed to the post the son of his own son's physician: Giovanni de' Medici and Marsilio Ficino were close friends. Though Marsilio was only 25, he was already a fine Latinist. He had also a passion for music and a boundless curiosity.

About that time, another Byzantine, a refugee from the Turks named

Argyropoulos, was trying to earn a living by lecturing. He adopted the title of Public Explainer of Aristotle, but on getting pressing requests he altered course and talked about Plato, while also teaching Greek in its ancient form. Ficino, who had accepted the traditional Aristotelian creed, took these language lessons, heard the lectures on Plato, and suffered a crisis of conscience. He was losing his Christian faith and here he was in training for the priesthood. He confessed. The head of his seminary forbade his attending lectures and sent him home. At home, Marsilio was found reading the Epicurean materialist Lucretius, so his father packed him off to Bologna to study law. At that point Cosimo intervened, telling the father: "You doctor bodies; he will doctor souls."

As a "domestic" in Cosimo's Villa Careggi, Ficino decorated the walls in fresco with astrological images and the figures of Democritus and Heraclitus, the rival Greek philosophers of nature, the one (says tradition) always laughing, the other weeping. Aristotle was nowhere to be seen. Next, Marsilio began to translate Plato, gathered around him students, artists, bankers, and politicians, and conducted what we should call seminars on Platonic and post-Platonic ideas—Porphyry, Plotinus, and also Hermes Trismegistus, the master magician. The prevailing mood was the mystical; Cosimo on his deathbed asked his young protégé to read to him from these works. When Marsilio shortly completed his commentary, *The Platonic Theology*, he had provided his fellow Humanists with a system that enabled them to replace the Catholic orthodoxy by Platonic mysticism while remaining good Christians.

The naturalistic strain in Marsilio had not vanished in Platonic mists. His *Book of Life* is a treatise of physical and mental hygiene for thinkers and writers. Its three parts are entitled: On Caring for the Health of Students; How to Prolong Your Life; and On Making Your Life Agree with the Heavens. In practicing judicial astrology, Ficino was no different from many other Humanists; to them it was a science, not a superstition, for it was based on observation and calculation and it enabled one to predict. This view was long held by scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, and their contemporaries.

Someone will say: "Is not Marsilio a priest? What do priests have to do with medicine? And furthermore, what business of his is astrology? What does a Christian have to do with magic and images?"

"But come, tell us what you condemn in the use of the stars? That it takes away free will and goes against the worship of one God? Well, I condemn and detest the same things you do. Nor is Ficino talking about the magic that is the cult of demons, but the natural kind that seizes from the heavenly bodies through natural things benefits for one's health."

—FICINO, *THE BOOK OF LIFE*

The advice given brain workers in *The Book of Life* is not out-of-date: eat and drink in moderation, sleep well, laugh and be merry as often as you can; do not repress sexual desire or over-indulge it. All these precepts are needed,

The advice given brain workers in *The Book of Life* is not out-of-date: eat and drink in moderation, sleep well, laugh and be merry as often as you can; do not repress sexual desire or over-indulge it. All these precepts are needed,

says Ficino, because intellectuals are prone to depression (then called melancholy), “a body-and-soul destroying disease” (222>).

As Cosimo had predicted, Ficino also doctored souls. He studied theology anew, was ordained a priest, and although still residing at the Villa Careggi, was appointed rector of a church at Nacoli, without duties, of course. It was this Humanist phase of Catholicism which, as the 15C ended, gave a good ground for the Protestant revolution about to come: the quiet attachment to Christian belief was offset by an open delight in the here-and-now; and an approving church hierarchy was giving these intellectuals support as non-resident priests, at the expense of pastoral care.

If anything showed that this blend of human and divine was widely accepted, it is the fame accorded in his day to Pico della Mirandola. He was a Count who had been a child prodigy destined for the church. Appointed by way of encouragement to a papal office at the age of ten, he studied the good letters at the universities of Bologna, Padua, and Florence, and Hebrew and Arabic on his own. At the age of 23 he set down 900 theses, of which the pope condemned seven and murmured about six more. Pico unwisely published a defense and had to take refuge in Paris, where he was imprisoned. But several Italian noblemen pulled strings and had him released, after which he lived and wrote and consorted with the “academicians” in Florence until his early death at 31.

His name is preserved—or used to be—by the curious tradition in Latin Europe of holding him up as a model to lycée students: he was represented as a walking encyclopedia whom they should emulate. (In my time, this ideal of becoming “a veritable Pic”—the French for Pico—was accepted very unevenly as between teachers and students.) What distinguished Pico, apart from erudition, was the originality of his faith, Humanist and Christian, but not limited to the gospel and the fashionable Plato. He did reject much of Aristotle, but as he explained in poetry and prose and summed up in his oration “On the Dignity of Man,” all theologians and philosophers had seen a portion of the truth; he would reconcile the two well-known Greeks, the neo-Platonic mystics, Thomas Aquinas, the Jewish authors of the Cabbala, and the Persian Zoroaster as well.

This breadth of view suggested to some the danger of knowing too many languages. Today, we agree with him though knowing hardly any. Pico argued that this “dignity” of man lay in the scope which God had bestowed on Adam before the Fall and which redemption had restored. A Humanist would also think of the ancient maxim of Plautus the playwright: “I am a man. Nothing

Now may every thoughtful mind thank God for having been allowed to be born in this new age, so full of hope and promise, which already rejoices in a greater array of noble and gifted souls than the world has seen in the last thousand years.

—MATTEO PALMIERI, *ON CIVIC LIFE* (1440)

O sublime generosity of God the Father! O highest and most wonderful felicity of Man! To him it was granted to be what he wills. The Father endowed him with all kinds of seeds and with the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow and bear fruit in him.

Who then will not wonder at this chameleon, Man, who was said by Asclepius of Athens able to transform his own nature owing to his mutability, and who is symbolized in the mysteries as Prometheus?

—PICO, "ON THE DIGNITY OF MAN" (1486)

human is alien to me." The word *dignity* can of course be interpreted as flouting the gospel's call to humility and denying the reality of sin. Humanism is accordingly charged with inverting the relation between man and God, with atheism and the secularizing of society.

What humanism at its fullest did reject, by implication as much as directly, was the ascetic ideal of physical and mental repression. Asceticism is often called inhuman, but it is just as much a human tendency as its opposite. The ascetic is often a sensualist

who has reached the limit of his capacity. In any case, we play fast and loose with the words *human* and *inhuman*, flattering ourselves by making *human* mean only the good things in our makeup or simply what we approve. The historian cannot subscribe to this policy, knowing as he does that cruelty, murder, and massacre are among the most characteristic human acts.

In declining the ascetic life and even the milder forms of self-reproach, the Humanists liberated the impulses that fuel INDIVIDUALISM, the desire that goes beyond the awareness of one's talents and demands room to develop them. The good society fosters Pico's sense of endless possibility. Individualism thus works toward EMANCIPATION, the modern theme par excellence.

*
* * *

Anything that can be said about the good letters implies the book, the printed book. To be sure, new ideas and discoveries did spread among the clerisy before its advent, but the diffusion of manuscripts is chancy and slow. Copying by hand is the mother of error, and circulation is limited by cost. As was noted earlier, print made a revolution out of a heresy (<4). Speed in the propagation of ideas generates a heightened excitement. Besides, the handwritten roll or sheaf (codex), on vellum or primitive paper, makes for awkward reading and for clumsy handling and storing. Indexing, too, was long absent or unsatisfactory, because the medieval mind rejected the alphabetical order—it was "artificial," "irrational," since no principle governs the sequence a, b, c, d, and the rest. To the modern lover of books, the product of the press is an object that arouses deep feelings, and looking at Dürer's charcoal drawing of hands holding a book, one likes to think the artist felt the same attach-

ment. The book, like the bicycle, is a perfect form.

With multiple copies of works available and new works rapidly coming out, the incentive to learning to read was increased. The one drawback to print is that the uniform finality of black on white leads the innocent to believe that every word so enshrined is true. And when these truths diverge from book to book (for the incentive to write and publish is also increased), the intellectual life is changed. From being more or less a duel, it becomes a free-for-all. The scrimmage makes for a blur of ideas, now accepted as a constant and fondly believed to be, like the free market, the ideal method for sifting truth.

Italy was a pioneer in that transformation also. In Venice at the end of the 15C an inventive printer-Humanist who called himself Aldus Manutius (from Aldo Manuzio or Manucci) founded a house which for a century issued the Greek and Latin classics in the best form. An Aldine edition meant excellence and is now for collectors to hoard. Aldus designed simpler forms and styles of letters, notably the italic, which tradition says was based on Petrarch's handwriting.^o The regular font is, again by apt tradition, called roman, without capital *r*. Before these now familiar fonts printers had imitated in metal the latest form of the copyists' handwriting, thereby producing the "black letter" volumes, now even more precious to collectors. There were ligatures between pairs of letters and special forms of the same letter for use when next to another. One font is known to have numbered 240 characters. The page was beautiful but not easy to read, especially for the recently illiterate. A modified black letter remained in German books until nearly the mid-20C.

Aldus was not the only great printer-designer. Every country could boast several of comparable genius, such as the Estienne brothers in France and the Elzevirs in Holland. To them collectively we owe several conveniences: punctuation, accents in the Romance languages, the spacing that makes words, sentences, and paragraphs stand out as units of meaning, with capital letters adding to this clarity. The first call for uniform spelling was also of that time and had the same purpose.

Another potent publisher was William Caxton. Starting out in life as a merchant and becoming wealthy, Caxton turned his thoughts to literature and began translating and writing out by hand a popular work. His "pen grew weary," as he tells it, so he learned printing, set up a press in Cologne, and after two years as publisher there returned to England. From then on, unlike his colleagues abroad, he kept translating and publishing works only in the vernacular. First and last, he brought out nearly all the best extant in English, notably Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Caxton's own

The Book *Versus* the Cathedral

This will kill that.

—VICTOR HUGO REFLECTING ON THE
STORYTELLING WALLS AND GLASS OF
NOTRE DAME (1831)

prose is not fluent, but his choice of one English dialect and his steady output for a public of lords, gentry, and clerics contributed to the eventual standardization of the language.^o

This first generation of international publishers did not merely make and sell books; they were scholars and patrons who translated the classics, nurtured their authors, and wrote original works. Their continual redesigning of letter forms gave rise to the new art of typography. Dozens of fine artists since 1500 have created typefaces for every kind of use without making the earliest ones obsolete. Books have a period look to the connoisseur; he can spot the date by the typeface, except that new books are still printed in Caslon, Jenson, Garamond, and other fonts made and named after these early printers. It is only very recently that an ugly, bastard alphabet (and numbers as on printed checks), has been contrived under silent pressure from non-human “readers.”

As a whole, the early printed book of good quality was a work of art. The page was a composition—whence the name compositor for the typesetter. Margins, space between lines, indents, capital letters—everything was in studied proportion, and the woodcut illustrations were by master hands—Holbein, Dürer, Cranach among the most prolific. This regard for beauty was not new; it continued the medieval tradition and was in one respect inferior to it: it lacked illuminated initials. It made up for it by a handsome title page, which named and often described the author: “Marsilio Ficino, Florentine and Celebrated Doctor and Philosopher”; to which was added the rudimentary blurb: “On caring for the health of students or those who work in Letters, taking care of their good health.” Next came the dedication to a patron, chief source of the author’s income. It was an ingenious device: in praising expectantly or uttering gratitude for past gifts, it gained a protector and, thanks to print, it might indeed bestow “immortal fame.” Both parties had an equal chance of profiting from the bargain. (Speaking of profit, the late 15C also saw the faint outline of the thought of copyright.)

As a physical object, the Humanist book differed in several respects from those that now overcrowd the city dweller’s shelves. To 16C scholars our usual octavo volume, although another Aldine invention, seemed miniaturized. Theirs was a thick and heavy folio measuring 12 by 15 inches or more. *Folio* means that the large printer’s sheet of thick rag paper was folded once to provide four pages. These were bound in leather- or vellum-covered boards—real boards, of wood, held shut by a metal clasp at midpoint of the vertical; cloth binding is only 175 years old. Often, a chain was attached to the book for safekeeping; it might be stolen—strange idea! As late as the 1750s, one such book, a folio Shakespeare, could be found moored to a lectern in the library at Yale. A notice specified that it was for the students’ “diversion” from the less frivolous reading of the real classics elsewhere in the room.

The *use* of the book in the modern era was marked by several other inno-

vations. People were now reading silently and alone.^o The monk in the gallery of the refectory reading to his brothers at mealtime was becoming a memory; likewise the university lecturer, insofar as his title means only “reader.” Medieval students had not been able to own the expensive hand copies of the learned works and libraries were rarely nearby or open to them; medieval disputation was a by-product of that scarcity. When the press made the pamphlet commonplace, in the 17C, one could contradict a colleague by rushing into print.

Printers and booksellers, as friends, confidants, and protectors of literary men, were often led to publish daring books that would sell because they were scandalous. They suffered for it in various ways. Among them, Etienne Dolet had the distinction of being burnt at the stake along with his works—“a martyr of the Book.” Originally a writer, he was a passionate admirer of Cicero but not a humane Humanist; on the contrary, brutal and unbalanced, he was known to have killed a man in a brawl, like Ben Jonson. Books, books everywhere, like home computers today; yet a shadow of the old oral habits lingered: it is seen in the Humanists’ partiality for the dialogue form to argue a case in print. It is an imitation of the ancients and an echo of the medieval *sic et non* (pro and con) oral disputing. The genre seems fair, but shows the author-character always winning. The oration, more often printed than delivered, was an equally popular Humanist genre, also modeled on the ancient classics, its tone based on the spoken word.

From these various aspects of the book important results may be deduced: print brought a greater exactness to the scholarly exchange of ideas—all copies are alike; a page reference can kill an argument by confounding one’s opponent out of his own words. A price is paid for this convenience: the book has weakened the memory, individual and collective, and divided the House of Intellect into many small flats, the multiplying specialties. In the flood of material within even one field, the scholar is overwhelmed. The time is gone when the classical scholar could be sure that he had “covered the literature” of his subject, the sources being finite in number. That is why E. M. Forster used to call “pseudo scholarship” anything not relating to the ancient classics—a rather harsh way to acknowledge the modern predicament. Lastly, in reading classical texts and Renaissance publications, one becomes aware of the ambiguity that has overtaken the word *book*. In the 16C and for a good while after, works carry titles that state the number of “books” within; for example, Jean Bodin’s *Six Books About the Commonwealth* (245>). Using “book” for “part,” and “chapter” for a short section, reminds us that the parchment roll or sheaf that was a book could not be very long or thick without being unwieldy, whence several “books” in one work.

*

* *

Humanists were not all professional bookmen. Among the most passionate were popes, beginning in the mid-15C with Nicholas V, a sincere Christian who made his court an art center and engaged the architect Alberti to draw plans for rebuilding not only the Vatican but also the shabby basilica of St. Peter's. This had not been the papal church, but it stood on the site of the oldest Christian cemetery, where the apostle named by Christ to head the church was presumably buried. In this rebuilding of St. Peter's, for which people to the north gave so many pence, the Humanist historical spirit was at work.

After a gap of a few years came another Humanist pope and author of a remarkable autobiography, Pius II, who wanted to be called Aeneas after *pius aeneas*, the hero of Virgil's epic. Similarly, Alexander VI took his name not from a saint, but from Alexander the Great. In between reigned one anti-Humanist pope, but his negative program failed. Apart from their varying moral caliber, the "Renaissance popes" are best known for their legacy in stone and paint, but they also relished poetry and music, plays, philosophical arguments, and exotic animals for their zoo.^o They paid lavishly for this princely display and set the pattern of the cultivated court.

By the third quarter of the century Julius II was on the throne—famed as fisherman and soldier, and victorious in wars that recovered papal territory. He was one of the ablest judges of artists and their works. It was he who actually started the reconstruction of St. Peter's. At the Vatican he created a sculpture garden around the "supreme statue," the *Apollo Belvedere*, and the no less famous Laocöon group, unearthed in 1506. Julius was bent on making Rome once again a beautiful city, using Bramante and Michelangelo as his designers. Julius also devised the indulgence scheme that recoiled on his successor Leo X, the connoisseur to whom Raphael owed his greatest commissions.

Such was the scene that revolted the young Luther. Viewed with his eyes, humanism was only a name for worldliness. The low morals of high churchmen often justified his verdict, yet on the whole, the Humanists were perhaps more truly Christian than the run-of-the-mill priests and monks or the fanatic Evangelicals who lived by violence yet deemed themselves saved by faith. For one thing, in filling their minds with the facts of the two ancient civilizations, the Humanists were forced to settle the perennial questions that precede religious belief: What is life for? What is man's duty and destiny? What is the significance of death?

The “Artist” Is Born

EAGER FOR NOVELTY in all things, confident of possessing vast quantities of new knowledge, proud of their scholarly and other fresh methods, the Humanist generations, armed with print, set about educating the world in all the arts and sciences. From anatomy to arithmetic and from painting to metallurgy, the presses kept issuing treatises, treatises. The later the date, the less likely were they to be in Latin; the common language of each country was easier for the printer, and the reading public was no longer exclusively clerical.

None of this means that the Middle Ages had failed to diffuse advances in practical knowledge, but this effort was restricted by their institutions. The guilds of artisans kept the tricks of the trade secret; they were valuable property, as are today patents and copyrights. By an unconscious pun, the French for craft—*métier*—was thought (erroneously) to be derived from *mistère* (= mystery). The men of science—alchemists and astrologers—also used to compete in secret for gainful ends. From the late 15C on, moved by a nascent INDIVIDUALISM and the decline of the guild spirit, all these brain workers relied more on talent than on secrets to protect the value of their services. Benefiting themselves from others’ inventions, they publicized their own in manuals that gave the latest news on technique.

One of the first to feel the urge to teach was the sculptor Ghiberti in the mid-15C. He was also the first to believe that an artist’s life was important to record for its lessons in craftsmanship. In this view of handiwork lay the germ of a new social type, the Artist. He or she was no longer a common performer of established manual tasks, no longer ruled by group rules, but an *uncommon* individual free to innovate. The treatises kept the artist class up to date about these innovations.

After Ghiberti’s, the deluge. His greatest, most prolific successor was Leone Battista Alberti, the 15C architect, who considered his art one with sculpture and painting and wrote on them—or it—accordingly. New buildings needed to be decorated, old ones restored, with additional figures in the round, and on the walls scenes in color, more impressively lifelike than ever.

Like most of his fellow theorists, Alberti was also a practitioner. He drew up the plans which, with some alterations, were carried out by Bramante, Michelangelo, Maderno, and Bernini to create the grandest monument of modern Rome, St. Peter's. This undertaking has been thought to mark the "rebirth of Rome," in parallel with the much questioned rebirth of the western mind (<47). A true polymath, Alberti expounded for painters the rules of perspective, and for businessmen those of computation and bookkeeping. His treatise on architecture, in Latin, was translated into French, Italian, Spanish, and English. We see here again the immense benefit of print.

Another Italian, Giorgio Vasari, impelled by the unexampled artistic outburst of his time, divided his energies between his profession of painter and builder in Florence and biographer of the modern masters in the three great arts of design. His huge collection of *Lives*, which is a delight to read as well as a unique source of cultural history, was an amazing performance in an age that lacked organized means of research—no interlibrary loan or union catalogue of books, much less the habit of interviewing, tape recorder in hand.

Vasari wanted to record more than facts and dates and anecdotes about the commissioning of great works and their execution. He describes techniques and discusses their merits and difficulties, adding to his estimates a theory of place, climate, and milieu that proves Rome unhealthy for men and works (the bad air ages both prematurely). Florence was ideal in all respects. Throughout, Vasari makes sure that his reader will appreciate the enhanced human powers shown in the works that he calls "good painting" in parallel with "good letters."

That so much light could be shed on method and achievement through books created the temptation that has

ever since accompanied every technical advance: the oversupply of guides, manuals, and instructive "lives." The exuberant output of the Renaissance, besides Alberti's writings, included works now classic: Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography and a pair of monographs on small-scale sculpture and the goldsmith's art,^o Palladio's treatise on building, Piero della Francesca's on design, Dürer's outline on painting and human proportions, and Leonardo's wide-ranging *Notebooks*.

Among other artist-theorists are names that raise but a faint echo today:

We who cast figures often call in the help of ordinance founders, but their insufficient experience and want of care may lead to terrible misfortunes, as nearly happened to my Perseus, a figure more than five cubits high, in a difficult pose, and with much rich detail. I therefore made a great number of air vents and many flow-in mouths, all diverging from the main one down the back. All these little hints are part of the craft. But because my methods were different from the usual ones, they neglected the furnace, the metal began to curdle, and none knew a remedy for the blunder.

—BENVENUTO CELLINI, *TWO TREATISES ON GOLDSMITHING AND SCULPTURE*

Serlio, Filarete, Lomazzo, Zuccaro, Ammanati, Van Mander, Von Sandrart—all dealing with the same topics, almost all describing the new science of perspective, several giving its geometrical rules in great detail, and along the way, much miscellaneous advice, ranging from the best way to grind pigments to the proper handling of apprentices.

What would strike a modern textbook publisher is the space given in these works to the importance for artists to have true faith and strict morals. Virtue is inseparable from good art. It is taken for granted that a work reveals the artist's soul as well as his mind. But what is more important, the work of art must by its order mirror the hierarchical order of the world, which is a moral order. Whether by intuition or by convention, the artist must know how to convey this reality. Hence the (to us) irrelevant injunctions in the treatises. For example, in his *Notebooks* [which is a book to read],^o Leonardo makes excuses for not being a writer, but he nonetheless shows himself a moral philosopher, a psychologist, and a creator of semi-mystical parables. That all art must be moral is the rule until the 19C, when it cuts loose from moral significance, from regard for virtue in the maker's character, and from the expectations of the public (474; 616>).

*
* * *

The sheer number of Renaissance treatises tells us something about the nature of a cultural movement. One tends to think of what goes by that name as comprising a handful of geniuses with a group of admirers, patrons, and articulate supporters whose names appear (so to speak) as footnotes in smaller type. Actually, it is a large crowd of highly gifted people—the mass is indispensable. This is a generality. And these many co-workers must be great talents, not duffers. They may be incomplete or unlucky as creators, their names may remain or turn dim, but in retrospect we see that this one or that contributed an original idea, was the first to make use of a device. Together, by what they do and say, they help to keep stirred up the productive excitement; they stimulate the genius in their midst; they are the necessary mulch for the period's exceptional growths.

This reflection goes some way toward answering our question when we wonder what conditions bring about great artistic periods, seemingly at random, here or there, and for a relatively short time. It is not, as some have thought, prosperity, or wise government support, or a spell of peace and quiet—Florence at its height was in perpetual conflict inside and outside. The first requisite is surely the clustering of eager minds in one place. They may not be on the spot to begin with; they come mysteriously from all over, when some striking cultural event bruited abroad, some decisive advance in technical means, draws them to its place of origin. Like the spread of the revolu-

tionary temper, the feverish interest, the opposition, and the rivalry among artists working, comparing, and arguing, generate the heat that raises performance beyond the norm. It takes hundreds of the gifted to make half a dozen of the great. The late-discovered genius who by mischance had to work alone in a remote spot is a sad survivor of solitude and is often maimed by it.

In the best periods practice precedes theory—works before notions. But, again in the best periods, the theories derived from practice tell us something (not all) about the intentions of the leading artists and the criteria applicable to their work. These commonplaces hold for 400 years and should not be laughed out of court to please late-20C critics whose own intention is to dis-

count artistic intention (621; 757>).

The Renaissance treatises declare that apart from his moral mission, the artist's duty (and thereby his intention) is to imitate nature. He must minutely observe "God's footstool"; it is a way to worship Him. This discipline parallels the scientist's, and more than one artist of the period thinks of himself as a "natural philosopher." No "two cultures" as yet divide the best minds.

Although in the Middle Ages natural forms served graphic artists as starting points, they felt no obligation to copy them faithfully. The different Humanist intention rests on the more concrete interest in nature that reading the ancients encouraged. Horace's *Art of Poetry* states the ideal of imitating life in literature and draws an analogy with painting. The same principle fitted the other arts, as anybody could see. The ancient figure sculpture that survived looked more lifelike, *humanior*, than the stylized saints lining the porches of Gothic cathedrals. The Greeks had no scruples about portraying their gods and goddesses in the guise of perfect human bodies. To the Humanist, the broken pieces of statuary discovered while digging the foundations of new buildings in Rome were golden hints of "nature."

It was a prime instance of familiar things being "taken" in a new way. The ancient temples, the Coliseum, the great memorial arches had been in plain sight for centuries, but now they were no longer pitiable remnants of paganism; they were majestic creations to be studied and copied. The architecture of northern Europe, which must now be called Gothic to stamp it as barbaric, had never been dominant in Italy. The climate favored wide windows, round arches, and interior spaces unlike those suited to the gray wintry north; so that when the desire for change arose in Petrarch's time, the mid-14C, there were elements at hand for a new style. The Certosa at Pavia, built not as a copy but

I saw behind the King's house at Brussels the fountain, maze, and beast garden; anything more beautiful and pleasing to me, and more like a paradise, I have never seen.

Erasmus is the name of the little man who wrote out my supplication at Herr Jacob de Bannisis' house. I took [made] a portrait at night, by candlelight, and drew Doctor Lamparter's son in charcoal, also the hostess.

—DÜRER, *TRAVEL DIARY* (1520)

making an original use of classical features, shows the transition from old to new as if designed to serve the cultural historian.

The same need for change in painting Vasari explains by saying that the good art had been obscured and forgotten in wars and tumults, leaving only the "crude manner of the Greeks" (meaning the Byzantines), whose medieval mosaics in the eastern Italian cities were never meant to look "natural." The accepted story of the turnabout in painting is that in the late 13C the Florentine Cimabue, after some works in the rigid tradition, depicted a Virgin in softer lines "approaching the modern manner—nobody had seen anything so beautiful." Vasari goes on to tell how the people of Florence carried the painting in a triumphal march from the painter's house to the church of Santa Maria Novella for which it had been commissioned.

Cimabue's protégé, Giotto, took the next step by basing himself on what Vasari calls "the true human form" and reproducing it as closely as he could. Nature entered in a further way through a Petrarchan interest in rocks and trees as settings: Giotto's St. Francis receives the stigmata not against a neutral background but in the countryside.

This new style is sometimes described as "realistic." This adjective and its opposite have become not only critical terms in the several arts, but also the commonest retort in the arguments of daily life: "That's unrealistic."—"Be realistic!" In all uses it is a regrettable pair of words. It begs the difficult question, what *is* the reality? Artists and ordinary people alike spend much of their time trying to find out—what do I perceive? what are the facts? If Renaissance painting gives us "the real world at last," why does it look so blindingly different in Michelangelo and in Raphael? And it goes on diverging: is nature—is reality—in Rubens or in Rembrandt? Reynolds or Blake? Copley or Allston? Manet or Monet?

True, all these artists present features of the world that are recognizable, in addition to common features of the art of painting itself. But the total effects differ; they correspond to the different visions of reality that dwell in the minds of different individuals, whether painters or not. Reflecting on the evidence, one would venture the generality that reality is to be seen in all of them and in others too. All styles of art are "realistic." They point to varied aspects and conceptions of experience, all of which possess reality, or they would not command the artist's interest in the first place and would not spark any response in the beholder. The variety of the Real confirms the importance of "taking" as a factor in life. Realism (with its implication of Truth) is one of the great western words, like Reason and Nature, that defy stable definition. It will come up again for discussion (552>). Here it is enough to question the term, and if one is needed to mark the difference between works that "resemble" rather than "symbolize," the word *naturalistic* is the less misleading of the two—perhaps.

Whatever may be the right word, the Renaissance artists believed that they had found the only true goal in art, and this for a “scientific” reason shortly to be told. But reason or no reason, the artists who count, in any school at any time, *know* that they are aiming at the right goal; it is the normal and necessary conviction for good work.

As for the terms *nature* and *imitation*, one must ask, how much do time and place, which is to say the surrounding culture, come between the object and its representation? To some extent, but not entirely. Artists tend to imitate other artists; a style or mood once adopted for its technical interest, or emotional value, or because it is in demand, becomes “nature” for both artist and viewer. The Venetian painter shows “Sacred and Profane Love” glowing in primary colors, even though the climate he works in is not invariably sunnier than that of Rome or Florence. In the north, the Flemings created an altogether different feeling about nature by showing in muted tones but fine detail quiet interiors, civic scenes, and tall ships. In between, the Germans retained a dark “Gothic” line and spirit in their recording of persons and places.

The various kinds of paint give a different appearance to equally faithful imitations, nor can pigments ever reach the brightness of light. The painter creates his illusion by favoring some colors and proportioning their intensities to match those in what he likes to look at; and there are many ways of accomplishing this relativism. He further creates emphasis by so-called functional lines, not dictated by strict perspective; or he distorts in other subtle ways for drama, as in Leonardo’s *Last Supper*, combining the effects of two points of view in place of one; or having the light come from two directions, as often in Rubens. Perspective is not “scientific”; it is an art of *calculated* illusion. In clever hands it can create *trompe l’oeil* pictures so “real” that one stretches one’s hand out to test its objects by touch; or again, so neatly foreshortened that a ceiling seen from far below shows Tiepolo’s figures adequately lifelike.

In the Renaissance it was assumed that the graphic arts must treat of clear subjects—indeed, must “tell” something, in addition to pleasing the eye and the sense of composition while also observing the rules of perspective. Classical myths naturally had a great appeal, but Christian subjects did not lose ground, especially after the Catholic counter-revolution, which promoted the decoration of new churches and the renovation of old ones.

I look upon a picture with no less pleasure than I read a good history. They are indeed both pictures, one done with words, the other with paint.

—ALBERTI, *ON ARCHITECTURE* (1452)

Religious and moral edification moved, so to speak, from the windows and porches of the church building to its interior walls, altars, and ceilings: the medieval “sermons in stone” now sermons in paint.

The Bible and the lives of the saints supplied the figures and scenes as before, but in many ways secularized: the Virgin looked like a peasant girl, the costumes were contemporary, the scenery local. Veronese went too far. When he put some drunkards and a dog in his *Last Supper*, he was summoned for sacrilege but after a long grilling got off rather lightly (76>).

*
* * *

With the artist becoming independent, a dedicated being, art itself begins to be an entity distinct from work, thought, faith, and social purpose. In the 16C it had not yet sworn off morality or ignored existing tastes, but the roots of autonomy were there. When a mural or altar piece came to be judged not for its pious effulgence and fitness for the spot in need of decoration, but instead for what we now call its aesthetic merit, art for art's sake was just below the horizon. Aesthetic appreciation is something more than spontaneous liking; a good eye for accurate representation is not enough; one must be able to judge and *talk about* style, technique, and originality. This demand gives rise to a new public character: the critic. The future professional begins by being simply the gifted art lover who compares, sees fine points, and works up a vocabulary for his perceptions. He and his kind are not theorists but connoisseurs and ultimately experts.

This rise in status ultimately led to the split between the knowing and the ignorant, who only "know what they like." We are told that the division did not yet exist in Renaissance Florence—everybody was a born appreciator—as in ancient Athens. In both cases this is a mere belief—or hope. Elsewhere in the 16C the two groups of beholders were at peace because they shared the same view about the role of art in society. Together they dictated fashion and taste, by purchase or utterance. From then on to the end of the 18C common opinion held that religious and history painting were the highest genres. The one edified, the other reminded; both decorated. Portraits came next, landscapes lagged behind. For nature was not yet loved for itself alone. In the early Renaissance it served as background only, and even then it was "humanized" by the presence of temples, columns, or other architectural fragments, along with actual figures. In the late 16C, other subjects made up the oddly named "genre painting"—aspects of day-to-day existence and bits of "still life," the less-than-natural assemblage of a dead bird, a hunting horn, and crockery.

As time went on, secular subjects gained in importance, in part because of a new technique: painting on canvas with pigments carried in oils. Michelangelo scorned this new trick "fit only for women and children," because the amateur or the inept professional could so easily correct a mistake—scrape it off and try again. Before oils, pigments dissolved in pure or lime water were applied to a wall which the artist himself had plastered; or

again, the colors were mixed with egg yolk and water, to a panel of poplar or other wood. To paint, one must have an infallible hand and a far-seeing mind; each stroke was final, as in watercolor today.

But the oil painting had a merit all its own: it was portable; it domesticated art. By the 17C the well-to-do citizen who was devout or fond of his own likeness could order or buy ready-made a canvas of modest dimensions and with it enliven a room. The work might depict a sacred subject or a familiar scene—the harbor and its fishing fleet, a girl sewing, the peasantry roistering on a holiday, or the night watch on its rounds. When “personalized,” it showed the members of the town council, complacent in their finery, or the purchaser himself, his wife and children, with a dog and sometimes a book. These uses of art anticipated the camera and its extravagant output of faces and places, but with one difference: early portraits do not seem to flatter the subject—witness Holbein’s *Henry VIII*. In the 16C no airbrush fix by a fashionable photographer revised nature.

Two other arts gained impetus from the general taste for reproducing “life”: book illustration—the woodcut with its thick lines matching the heavy type of the page at first, then the steel engraving, better suited to go with the finer fonts. Equally popular was the art of tapestry, in demand as much for wall insulation in cold climates as for decorative effect.

Faithful imitation implied an indefatigable study of human anatomy and the shape and texture of inanimate objects. The nude thereby became a regular part of subject matter and schooling. Still, a painting is art only if it is an

Painting is a thing of the mind [*cosa mentale*]. The painter who draws by practice and judgment of the eye without the use of reason is like a mirror, which reproduces in itself all the objects placed before it, with no knowledge of what they are.

—LEONARDO, *NOTEBOOKS*^o

organized whole. For composition and harmony and even more for dramatic force, nature must be rearranged. Some distortion in the figures themselves, their placement, and in the relations marked by light, shade, and color is called for, in addition to the use of conventional symbols that designate the saint or hint at the burgher’s occupa-

tion. In short, the painter must think.

Such was the meaning of the dictum that imitation must not be slavish. That warning opened the door to every imaginative possibility. It meant that the artist’s goal could be beauty, that “divine attribute.” And beauty being a preconceived idea, it requires compromise with what nature gives us in the raw state. Michelangelo explicitly rejects the copying of externals. Platonists like him drew out of each natural object its more perfect, transcendent model, while Aristotelians saw in the ideal form the fulfillment that matter must reach in order to become reality. Both philosophies led to the same plastic ends.

Stoics and Epicureans, for their part, also regarded nature as supplying

the ideal pattern that human life must try to attain. But knowing that nature continually destroys and re-creates individual things, they placed a modest value on the imitation of transitory objects. If undertaken, let it be done soberly. Such ideas about Nature—nature as model and yardstick—long antedated the Renaissance. They have not ceased to mold belief and behavior in many departments of life; "follow nature and you cannot go wrong" has been reiterated with unblushing confidence. But what Nature includes or what it dictates are remains in debate. Still more often, the word *natural* is simply invoked as self-evident proof of whatever is being urged.

The grand innovation that made Renaissance painters certain that theirs was the only right path for art was the laws of perspective. The discovery made them as proud as the men of letters after *their* discovery of the true path. For some Nature had been rediscovered; for the others, civilization had been restored. Perspective is based on the fact that we have two eyes. We therefore see objects as defined by two lines of light that converge at a distance, the painter's "vanishing point" on the horizon. Since those two lines form an acute angle, plane geometry can show the size and place that an object at any distance must be given in the painting to make it appear as it looks in life.

Another way to grasp the situation is to imagine a pyramid with its point at the spot where the lines from the eyes come together and its base touching one's nose. Then a slice made anywhere across the pyramid will show the relative size that distant objects and figures must have on the canvas to look "real." Or again, when the jet plane is about to land and one looks down, the size of the cars on the highway gets larger as the plane gets nearer the ground, because one is pushing forward (so to speak) the base of the pyramid. This relativism of size according to distance when figures and things are seen against a flat surface is exact. Hence the statement in an early Renaissance treatise that painting consists of three parts: drawing, measurement, and color.^o One of the uses of color is to create "aerial perspective." A light blue-gray makes distant objects in the painting look hazy, as they appear to the eye owing to the thickness of the atmosphere. Combined, the two perspectives create the illusion of depth, the three-dimensional "reality" on a flat surface. Our seeing objects "in depth" is itself an illusion, for without the sense of touch to make us aware of solids and the habitual expectation thus created, what we see from the jet plane would be as flat as the patterns of wall paper. But early in life we associate the findings of hands and eyes and reconstruct the world from the signs that imply three dimensions.

*

* *

In any art a new technical power leads to uses and ideas not suspected at first. With lifelikeness, painting gained more and more autonomy from social

use as illustration of religious ideas. It could stand by itself, whatever it showed. The viewer needed less imagination to make out the intention, thus enlarging subject matter indefinitely and giving interest to things in and for themselves. With so much knowledge written down and disseminated and so many ardent workers and eager patrons conspiring to produce the new, it was inevitable that technique and style should gradually turn from successful trial and error to foolproof recipe. The close study of antique remains, especially in architecture, turned these sources of inspiration into models to copy. The result was frigidity—or at best cool elegance. It is a cultural generality that going back to the past is most fruitful at the beginning, when the Idea and not the technique is the point of interest. As knowledge grows more exact, originality grows less; perfection increases as inspiration decreases.

In painting, this downward curve of artistic intensity is called by the suggestive name of Mannerism. It is applicable at more than one moment in the history of the arts. The Mannerist is not to be despised, even though his high competence is secondhand, learned from others instead of worked out for himself. His art need not lack individual character, and to some connoisseurs it gives the pleasure of virtuosity, the exercise of power on demand, but for the critic it poses an enigma: why should the pleasure be greater when the power is in the making rather than on tap? There may be no answer, but a useful corollary is that perfection is not a necessary characteristic of the greatest art.

To anyone in the mid-16C who looked back to Petrarch or Giotto or Wycliffe and thought of recent work in literature and the graphic arts or scholarship and religious thought, it must seem evident that the accumulation of desirable changes meant Progress. The word and a theory about it arose^o and provided a new standard of judgment: are we improving? Change came to be judged a move forward or backward, the latter being pointless. This in time generated the familiar labels progressive, conservative, and reactionary. The doctrine of progress was thus no foolish fantasy of the 18C philosophes, as is generally believed, which the 19C made into a creed certified by the forward march of industry. Now that the notion is generally decried—“the arts do not progress, nor does the moral character of man”—a look at its 16C origins makes clear how reasonable, how irresistible, how useful the new cultural yardstick was.

First was the conviction at the heart of Humanism—“more human,” therefore better than the medieval outlook, behavior, and language. Next, the awareness of techniques obviously “advanced”—perspective in painting, polyphony in music (158>), improvements in the practical arts and the sciences. Finally, a sense of refinement in manners and the consciousness of religion purified, for both churches, by the Evangelical revolution. Ramus (Pierre La Ramée), who perished in the massacre of the St. Bartholomew, was confident that in the century just past greater advances had been made “in man and

works" than in the preceding fourteen hundred years. Another observer, Guillaume Postel, who had traveled to the Orient, foresaw continual progress and world unity, unless the wars and plagues that Providence might decree destroyed all the knowledge stored in books.° Otherwise, latest was best.

To be aware of progress means being also aware of who has done the new thing, who is campaigning for the new idea. The individual gains in value: so-and-so is the talent to employ, to talk about and praise—or attack from a rival's point of view. Renaissance enthusiasm thereby built up the artist into a figure destined to be more and more extra-ordinary, more and more exempt from convention and the law. His predecessor, the *artisan*—any man who worked with his hands—now rose in status if he worked in one of the *fine* arts, again a new distinction. It was not established all at once; for the people at large, the taint of the grubby hand persisted. It was no doubt to placate the other servants, including the paymaster, that Philip IV of Spain put Velasquez on the payroll as an upholsterer. [The book to read is *Artist and Craftsman* by H. Ruhemann.]°

The marks of the new type were none the less clear. The artist was no longer anonymous as he had almost always been in the Middle Ages (in contradistinction to the author, whose hand was not grubby). The builder, sculptor, painter now signed his work or was credited in print. Again, he chose his patron as often as his patron chose him. Cities and burghers hired his services only for the specified task; he traveled where money and fame awaited him, or at least were held out as bait, for payment was often hard to collect. The great are lavish in words but stingy or impecunious in cash (334>). This foot-loose practice enabled the artist to serve simultaneously two patrons who might be at war with each other. It even made artists useful as ambassadors from one court to another if they had the right personality. Rubens is the great example of the artist as statesman, supreme in both roles (334>).

Clearest sign of independence, the patron (or his majordomo) who tries to inject his ideas into the design is told not to meddle in matters which he does not understand. In time it became impossible for the patron to coerce or even direct "his" artist.

The artist is occasionally a writer as well. He describes his work and his views, he tells of his struggles, publishes his grievances, gives good and bad marks to his employers—Cellini

The whole world is full of learned people, learned teachers, and large libraries, and it's my belief that neither in Plato's time nor Cicero's were there so many facilities for study as now.

—RABELAIS, LETTER TO PANTAGRUEL FROM
HIS FATHER GARGANTUA (1532)

And further, if I am to do any work for Your Holiness, I beg that none may be set in authority over me in matters touching my art. I beg that full trust may be placed in me and that I may be given a free hand.

—MICHELANGELO, SCULPTOR,
FLORENCE (1524)

It is a duty incumbent on upright and credible men of all ranks who have performed any thing noble or praiseworthy to record in their own words the events of their lives. But they should not undertake this honorable task until they are past the age of forty.

—BENVENUTO CELLINI, OPENING
SENTENCE OF HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY
(c. 1558)

flunked Clement VII—and like Petrarch appealed to Posterity. [The book to browse in is Cellini's autobiography.]

*
* *
*

After the Council of Trent, when every form of religious opinion was more or less under surveillance by church authorities, works of art were

liable to censorship. The case mentioned earlier of Veronese's *Last Supper* is notorious. His interrogatory shows the painter confident that in the exercise of their art artists are free agents. The tribunal pressed hard but did not shake him. Asked first about his trade, the accused said: "I paint and compose figures." The quizzing goes on:

Q. Do you know why you have been summoned?

A. I can well imagine. Your Lordships had ordered the Prior of the Convent to have a Magdalen painted in the picture [of the Lord's Last Supper] instead of the dog. I told him that I would do anything for my honor and that of the painting, but that I did not see how a figure of Magdalen would be suitable there.

Q. Have you painted other Suppers besides this one?

A. Yes, my lords. [He mentions five.]

Q. What is the significance of the man whose nose is bleeding? And those armed men dressed as Germans?

A. I intended to represent a servant whose nose is bleeding because of some accident. We painters take the same license as poets and I have represented two soldiers, one drinking and the other eating on the stairs, because I have been told that the owner of the house was rich and would have such servants.

Q. What is Saint Peter doing?

A. Carving the lamb to pass it to the other end of the table.

Q. And the one next to him?

A. He has a toothpick and cleans his teeth.

Q. Did anyone commission you to paint Germans, buffoons, and similar things in your picture?

A. No, my lords, but to decorate the space.

Q. Are not the added decorations to be suitable?

A. I paint pictures as I see fit and as well as my talent permits.

Q. Do you not know that in Germany and other places infected with heresy,

pictures mock and scorn the things of the Holy Catholic Church in order to teach bad doctrine to the ignorant?

A. Yes, that is wrong, but I repeat that I am bound to follow what my superiors in art have done.

Q. What have they done?

A. Michelangelo in Rome painted the Lord, His Mother, the Saints, and the Heavenly Host in the nude—even the Virgin Mary.

The Illustrious Judges decreed that the painting must be corrected within three months, at the expense of the painter. In the end, he changed nothing except the title of the work.

It should not be thought that in becoming artists, painters and their kind ceased to be artisans in the physical sense. Painter and sculptor, engraver and architect did not throw off their smock and keep their hands clean like the writer at his desk. The graphic arts are rooted in matter and the least competence requires skill and knowledge about pigments, oils, glue, wood, wax, plaster—and how to handle raw eggs.

[The book to browse in is *The Artist's Handbook* by Ralph Mayer.] The sculptor is equally a workman, his hands roughened by chipping stone and his hair full of plaster dust; the architect oversees the masons and bricklayers as one familiar with their routines, and he scampers up scaffoldings—like the painter of frescoes.

The painter's ad hoc chemistry has to be learned, and in the Renaissance and for two centuries more, the training of artists was by the apprentice system inherited from the medieval guilds. It would have been folly in the 16C to transfer the teaching of art to the universities or to special schools as we have done. The 16C artist needed a group of trainees to help him in the routine manual tasks and the “filler” portions of the very large works commissioned for churches and city halls. This system was so effective that it is the cause of present-day puzzles that bedevil museum curators and art dealers: Is this a Rembrandt? Or is it a superb piece by So-and-so, known to have been one of his best assistants? The master's teaching imparted the master touch. And in doing so well, the “ghost” Rembrandt was unwittingly carrying out the medieval principle, which was that the good artisan reproduces the model

**My beard turns up to heaven; my nape
falls in,
Stuck to my spine. My breastbone visibly
Grows into a harp; a rich decoration
Adorns my face with paint drops thick and
thin.**

**My loins into my paunch like pistons grind,
My buttocks like a saddle bear my weight.
My feet unguided wander to and fro;
Crosswise I strain, bending like a bow.
Come, Giovanni**

**Help save my pictures and good name,
Since I'm so badly off and painting is my
shame.**

—MICHELANGELO, “ON PAINTING
THE SISTINE CHAPEL”

exactly, whether it is a picture for the guild hall or a felt hat for the Lord Mayor. The artist does the opposite: he follows his bent, creates his own style, as Petrarch recommended. In the course of time, he *must* be original altogether if he is not to be deemed academic, worthless. But even before the cult of the new (160>), the users of new techniques advertised their *ars nova, dolce stil nuovo*, or *via moderna*.

Contract for the *Pietà*, August 7, 1498

... the Most Reverend Cardinal di San Dinizio has agreed that Maestro Michelangelo, statuary of Florence, shall make a *Pietà* of marble, a draped figure of the Virgin Mary with the dead Christ in her arms, the figures being life-size, for 450 ducats, 150 to be paid before the work is begun. And I, Jacopo Gallo, promise that the said Michelangelo will complete the work within a year and that it shall be more beautiful than any work in marble to be seen in Rome today.

—GALLO, A COLLECTOR OF ANTIQUES,
ACTING AS AGENT FOR THE SCULPTOR

ulative eye of the art dealer, who also first appears in the 16C. Society meanwhile, though a willing customer in a general way, fumbles at that insoluble problem, the patronage of art (338>).

*

* *

By a pleasant custom dating back to the last century, a noted brain-surgeon who plays the violin, can sail a boat, and keeps up with new books is known among his friends as a Renaissance man. He deserves credit, certainly, for battling against the force of SPECIALISM, but his qualifications for the honorific title fall a little short when he is compared with, say, Alberti, who not only painted and built and theorized, but was also a poet and playwright, a musician (organist), and a writer on theology and philosophy.

What Pico thought man could develop in himself and what Castiglione was to describe as the perfect creature of a civilized court (85>) excluded no faculty of the mind—hence the label *uomo universale*. But it called for at least the basis of Humanism, “the good letters”; and this is why the figure so often cited nowadays as *the* Renaissance man, Leonardo da Vinci, does not deserve the title. He has obviously been chosen to flatter our dominant interests: art and science. Towering as a painter, he was also preoccupied with civil engi-

neering, aviation, and scientific observation generally. His machines did not work, but his sketches and calculations for them are remarkable. The combination of the "two cultures" is to us striking and so is his persevering "research." Yet of all the men of his period he is the outstanding case of the genius who was not a Renaissance man in the intended sense: he lacked the good letters. He speaks of this limitation himself. He cared nothing about Latin and Greek. He never wrote poems or orations. He had little to say about philosophy and theology. He took no interest in history; to paint a mural in the Governors' Palace in Florence, he had to borrow Machiavelli's notes on a famous battle. Nor was he an architect or a sculptor. Worst of all, he had no use for music, which (he said) had two great faults—one mortal, in that music ceased to exist as soon as the piece was over; and one he called "wasting": its continual repetition, which made it "contemptible."

A close ranking of candidates would place Luther higher than Leonardo, for Luther was a great writer and orator (though not a great classicist), a musician, a theologian, a practiced observer of nature and (as we saw) a willing partaker of the life of the senses (<17). To Leonardo, a picture was more fully expressive than the products of any other art, and even in painting his output was small. The point of this comparison is not to disparage Leonardo, whose genius is beyond question, or to replace him in the hall of fame with Alberti, the encyclopedic talent. It is only to restore the proper meaning of the honorific title now bandied about heedlessly. A once popular book that used the phrase Renaissance man as a title offered Machiavelli, Castiglione, Aretino, and Savonarola as representatives.^o They are not the best that might be chosen, but they suggest the interdisciplinary mind, a cultural type more wondered at today than truly appreciated. In a genuine instance, the murmur "jack-of-all-trades" is likely to be heard.

Actually, the true Renaissance man should not be defined by genius, which is rare, or even by the numerous performing talents of an Alberti. It is best defined by variety of interests and their cultivation as a proficient amateur. A Renaissance man *or woman* has the skill to fashion verses and accompany or sing them; a taste for good letters and good paintings, for Roman antiquities and the new architecture; and some familiarity with the rival philosophies. To all this must be added the latest refinements in manners as practiced in the princely courts, where men and women were expected to talk agreeably, to dance gracefully, to act in masques, and improvise other at-home theatricals. Social life for them was a species of serious work for mutual pleasure, one motive being to

If you [poets] call painting "dumb poetry," then the painter may say of the poet that his art is "blind painting." Consider which is the more grievous affliction, to be blind or dumb?

—LEONARDO, *NOTEBOOKS*

fend off boredom. The men must be soldiers; both sexes could be adept at politics. In short, it is the exact opposite of our intellectual and social specialisms, the reverse of our prefabricated hobbies and entertainments.

It was of course easier in the 16C and 17C than now to be a generalist in the arts and to some extent in science (191>). These subjects were not so much accessible as manifest, and the lines between them were hardly drawn. One might say that life itself was general. Under colorful differences, similar cultural attitudes and arrangements prevailed in Rome, Florence, Venice, and Padua; in Paris and London, in Antwerp and Lisbon. A sizable group from the upper classes accepted the talented; the latter being “domestics” in the residential sense. All as it were “practiced high culture” in the newest forms that had

reached the place, all were ready to follow the latest whims of taste as these were wafted from whichever was then the most active center of innovation.

Travel in the younger sort is part of Education; in the elder, a part of Experience. He that travels into a country before he has some entrance into the language goes to school and not to travel. The things to be seen are: the courts of princes, the courts of justice, the churches, the monuments, walls, and fortifications, harbors, antiquities, ruins, and libraries, colleges, shipping and navies, houses and gardens, armories and arsenals, exchanges, warehouses, exercises of horsemanship, fencing, and training of soldiers, comedies of the better sort, treasuries of jewels, robes, and rarities, as well as triumphs, masques, feasts, weddings, and capital executions.

—BACON, “OF TRAVEL” (1626)

Seconding this movement of ideas was the astonishing amount of traveling done, despite hardships and hazards. The switchabout of scholars between universities, the tide of artists to the liveliest spot and of gentlemen and ladies to the capital cities—none of this organized—was incessant. It went with a polyglot frame of mind; the nation-state had not yet concentrated mind-and-heart on one country and one language. In Rome and Paris the very beggars made their pitch in several languages as the stranger approached.

Because this group of globe-trotters belonged to the upper orders (and were not as yet too numerous), they could count on being received abroad by one of their peers without previous notice or acquaintance, even in a small town. Word would come from the innkeeper to the burgomaster or to the squire that a person of quality had arrived, and an invitation would follow. [The travel book to read is Montaigne’s *Diary of 1580–81.*]° Artists, unless famous, would carry letters of introduction.

The prerequisite for these activities was leisure. Nobles and their kept artists, not being workers captive to the nine-to-five, enjoyed freedom not at stated times but in scattered fragments throughout the day. Artists are envied now for the same reason. But leisure is not the simple thing it seems. The people who supported 16C culture were embroiled in politics, love intrigues, and vendettas; they fought in wars, and bore the usual burden of managing

their estates and of adding to them by complicated marriages and long-drawn-out negotiations. They were not idlers or free of worries. Yet they did things that appear impossible without casual *far niente*. The paradox has only one explanation: leisure is a state of mind, and one that the modes of society must favor and approve. When common routines and public approval foster only Work, leisure becomes the exception, an escape to be contrived over and over. It is then an individual privilege, not a custom, and it breeds the specialized recreations and addictions of our time.

As for the artists in the noble palace, they too were kept busy at other things than their art. They must devise the frequent elaborate entertainments and also serve in humbler ways. Velasquez "the upholsterer" had to supervise King Philip's house staff. But these arrangements, usual in the 16th and 17C for living a hundred or more under one roof, facilitated the pleasurable activities. The palaceful of retainers afforded quick communication and direct execution. Planning a ball or a masque went from my lord to the poet, the musician, and the carpenter without the deliberations of a committee. Besides, living and working together softened the distinctions of rank. Antagonism, if any, was individual rather than class-inspired, though arrogance at the top and envy at various levels below found its opportunities. Not a family and not a clan, the "house" was nevertheless a protective institution. All within the group had a role and a living, regardless of status, talent, or schooling; and as the master's "people," wearing his livery, they could count on his support inside and defense outside. It was a society in little. [The book to read is *The Marriage of Figaro*—Beaumarchais' play,° not Da Ponte's opera libretto.]

It is a temptation to credit the Renaissance with another new social type, the journalist. But that would be playing with the word *type*: the age produced one specimen, not a type: Aretino, and he proved a sample of the kind not much in favor with the conscientious writer for the press today. The son of a cobbler and entirely self-educated, Aretino used his extraordinary narrative style in the vernacular tongue to purvey news in *avisi* (broadsheets) and letters that everybody wanted to read, because they were often scandalous. The persons and politics of the highly placed were his target, and it has been thought that sometimes he used his information for blackmail. He could praise as well as ridicule and would receive propitiatory gifts, one from the French king, Francis I. The poet Ariosto put Aretino in his epic (147>) under a nickname that has stuck: "the scourge of princes." Nowadays it takes a staff of paid informers among the fashionable to keep a scandal sheet going. Being a Renaissance man, he did it alone.

Aretino attached himself to various princes, rarely for very long until mid-career, when he settled in Venice and periodically published collections of his letters. He wrote plays and dialogues that are esteemed as high-class erotica. He was loyal to the friends he made among the painters, notably

Titian, and led in their appreciation by the public. He closed his career, predictably, with two works of devotion.

*
* *
*

The suggestion made about the term *Renaissance man* coupled it with *woman* in italics. This was no afterthought but a heralding of the truth that 16C society was molded and directed by a host of women as brilliant as the men and sometimes more powerful (85>). On an earlier page I said that in this book I would adhere to the long use of *man* as a word that means human being—*people*—men and women alike, whenever there is no need to distinguish them. Why then make a point of Renaissance women if already included in Renaissance man? First, to emphasize the presence in the group being discussed of the women we are about to meet, and secondarily for a chance to discuss the usage of *man* followed in these pages. Here, then, is

A Digression on a Word

The reasons in favor of prolonging that usage are four: etymology, convenience, the unsuspected incompleteness of “man and woman,” and literary tradition.

To begin with the last, it is unwise to give up a long-established practice, familiar to all, without reviewing the purpose it has served. In Genesis we read: “And God created Man, male and female.” Plainly, in 1611 and long before, *man* meant human being. For centuries zoologists have spoken of the species Man; “Man inhabits all the climatic zones.” Logicians have said “Man is mortal,” and philosophers have boasted of “Man’s unconquerable mind.” The poet Webster writes: “And man does flourish but his time.” In all these uses *man* cannot possibly mean *male* only. The coupling of *woman* to those statements would add nothing and sound absurd. The word *man* has, like many others, two related meanings, which context makes clear.

Nor is the inclusive sense of human being an arbitrary convention. The Sanskrit root *man*, *manu*, denotes nothing but the human being and does so par excellence, since it is cognate with the word for “I think.” In the compounds that have been regarded as invidious—*spokesman*, *chairman*, and the like—*man* retains that original sense of human being, as is proved by the word *woman*, which is etymologically the “wife-human being.” The *wo* (shortened from *waef*) ought to make *woman* doubly unacceptable to zealots, but the word as it stands seems irreplaceable. In a like manner, the proper name Carman is made up of *car*, which meant male, and *man*, which has its usual *human being* application. *Car*, originally *carl* or *kerl*, was the lowest order of freeman, often a rustic. (*Carl* has further given us *Charles* and *churlish*.)

In English, words denoting human beings of various ages and occupations have changed sex over time or lost it altogether. Thus at first *girl* referred to small children of either sex, likewise *maid*, which meant simply "grown-up," and the ending *-ster*, as in *spinster* and *webster*, designated women. It is no longer so in *gangster* and *roadster*. Implications have shifted too. In Latin, *homo* was the human being and *vir* the male, so that *virtue* meant courage in battle; in English it long stood for chastity in women. The message of this mixed-up past is that it is best to let alone what one understands quite well and not insist on a one-sided interpretation of a word in common use.

Some may brush aside this lesson from usage old and new with a "Never mind. Nobody knows or thinks about the past and *man* remains objectionable." At this point the reformer must face practical needs. To repeat at frequent intervals "man and woman" and follow it with the compulsory "his and her" is clumsy. It destroys sentence rhythm and smoothness, besides creating emphasis where it is not wanted. Where *man* is most often used, it is the quick neutral word that good prose requires. It is unfortunate that English no longer has a special term for the job like French *on*. But *on* is only the slimmed down form of *hom(me)*—man again.

For the same neutral use German has *man*, true to the Sanskrit and meaning people. English had the identical word for the purpose until about 1100. German has also *Mensch* with the sense of human being. So at bottom both French and German carry on the same double meaning of *man* as English, just more visibly; it is the only convenient generic term when it is not perversely interpreted. There is after all an obligation to write decent prose and it rules out recurrent oddity or overinsistence on detail, such as is necessary (for example) in legal writing. Besides, the would-be reformers of usage utter contradictory orders. They want *woman* featured when men are mentioned but they also call for a ban on feminine designations such as *actress*.

The truth is that any sex-conscious practice defeats itself by sidetracking the thought from the matter in hand to a social issue—an important one, without question. And on that issue, it is hardly plausible to think that tinkering with words will do anything to enhance respect for women among people who do not feel any, or increase women's authority and earnings in places where prejudice is entrenched.

Finally, the thought occurs that if fairness to all divisions of humanity requires their separate mention when referred to in the mass, then the listing must not read simply "men and women", it must include *teenagers*. They have played a large role in the world and they are not clearly distinguished in the phrase "men and women." Reflection further shows that mention should be given to yet another group: children. The child prodigy in music is a small category. But one must not forget the far larger group of 8-, 10-, and 12-year-olds: boys (and sometimes girls in disguise) who in the armies and navies of

the West have served in fife-and-drum corps or as cabin boys. Columbus's ships had a large contingent; all the great explorers of the New World relied on sizable teams of these hard-worked crew members. Manet's painting of the small fife player and one by Eva Gonzales remind us of the continued use of these little waifs past the mid-19C. Perhaps the last child to be so memorialized is to be seen in Eastman Johnson's "The Wounded Drummer Boy," portrayed at the height of the American Civil War.

Western culture is also indebted to children in a less cruel way, through the age-old institution of the boys' choir in church. In Renaissance England the "Boy Players" were actors, not amateurish as in the modern school play, but professionals and organized in companies. One of these was a serious competitor of Shakespeare's troupe.

The teenagers' cultural contribution is more varied and better recorded, and the thought it brings to mind is the marked difference between earlier times and our own in the feeling about age. When the 19C novelist George Sand at 28 declared herself too old to marry (by custom she had been an old maid since 25) or when Richard II, 14 years old, alone in a large field, faced Wat Tyler's massed rebels and pacified them with a speech, attitudes were taken for granted that are hard for us to imagine. Nearly to the beginning of the present century, society accorded teenagers roles of social responsibility. Rossini first conducted an orchestra at 14 and led the Bologna Philharmonic at 18. Weber was even younger in a comparable position.

In war and government, posts of command were won early. Alexander Hamilton, also at 14, set the rules for captains who traded with the firm that employed him on St. Croix Island, and he was 19 when Washington made him aide-de-camp. Pitt the Younger was prime minister at 23. Lagrange was professor of mathematics at the Turin School of Artillery at 19. And in Castiglione's manual of Renaissance manners, *The Courtier* (85>), one of the engaging figures is Francesco della Rovere, nephew of the pope, Lord General at 17, and soon to be "General of Rome." In the book he has just lost a battle but not the respect of his friends. His rank, his charm, and his mind ensure his being listened to as if he were a mature philosopher. Teenagers could lead armies in battle, for an older warrior's young page might be made a knight at 12 and there was no ladder of ranks between the first signs of talent and the top—witness several of Napoleon's marshals.

Cultural expectations were based on early mortality and spurred the young to live up to them. Melanchthon wrote an acceptable play when not quite 14 and Pascal's essay on conic sections, written at the age of 15, won the praise of Leibniz and other mathematicians. Halley—later famous for his comet—was a serious astronomer at the age of 10. The same often held good of the women. Catherine de' Medici was married early to her husband Henry, heir to the throne of France. She was 14 (a little older than Shakespeare's

Juliet) and he a few weeks older than his wife. The marriage had been arranged by the pope as part of a complex political scheme, and to make it secure it was imperative that Catherine should produce a son in short order. When Henry proved unequal to the work, the pope challenged Catherine with the words: "A clever girl surely knows how to get pregnant somehow or other." We shall shortly meet this great stateswoman in her prime (86>).

*
* *
*

In that same book of *The Courtier*, which is nearly contemporaneous with Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, one soon notices that two of the characters, Gaspar and Octavian, are declared enemies of women and that they are steadily refuted by the rest. The majority opinion is that women are equal to men in understanding, virtue, and ability, including at times physical prowess. They are shown to be great rulers, poets, and conversationalists. Two of the four women in the dialogue are the moderators, and their decisions show them to be as well informed as the men about the topics being discussed. That (still in this portrayal) women's wish to preserve tenderness in their conduct may lead them to use different ways of doing what men do is true, but the result is nonetheless excellent. Men, although benefiting from women's civilizing influence, should not lose through refinement the robust aggressive qualities they are born with and need for their special tasks.

The vindication of women was not a mere notion of Castiglione's. The evidence for his assertions was all around him. The 16C was full of women who exerted their talents like men for all to see and judge. The Vatican under the Renaissance popes was crowded with women politicians—nieces or sisters-in-law of the reigning power and others less closely related, who struggled among themselves for the exercise of that power. One or two of them remained the ultimate decision-maker for years. Their world of court intrigue brought out abilities that in another setting would have successfully ruled a modern nation.

That setting did exist and was well occupied. Isabella of Castile, as will appear (98>), was again and again Ferdinand's *better* half in governing Spain at a critical time in the making of the nation. Later in the century, Philip II had Spain well in hand but was beset by an over-extended empire, and needed a deputy to govern the unruly Netherlands. He appointed as governor his illegitimate sister, Margaret of Parma. In the nine years of her authority over a growling rebellion, her skillful efforts to achieve reconciliation postponed the outbreak. She has not been celebrated because she was "on the wrong side," and because her successor, the Duke of Alva used cruel means of repression. Modern Liberal feeling cheers for the Dutch and condemns all who tried to prevent their emancipation. But the cause and outcome of a struggle give no measure of the ability displayed by either side. Fair judgment should follow

the model that has made a hero of General Robert E. Lee although he lost a war fought to preserve slavery.

Another 16C stateswoman, well worth notice, is Louise of Savoy (also a 14-year-old bride), without whom her son Francis would very likely not have been King of France, the line of succession being in dispute. She adored that vain and self-indulgent youth and she deployed her diplomatic genius to such affect that he did gain the throne and once on it performed not badly. Why is Louise not listed among history's king-makers? Or mentioned as the negotiator of the Treaty of Cambrai that ended France's War with Spain in 1529 and was soon known as the *Paix des Dames*, because the other contracting party was

Elizabeth I of England

She assigned Thursday as bear-baiting day and decreed that the giving of plays on that day was "a great hurt to this and other pastimes which are maintained for Her Majesty's pleasure." The Master of the Bears requisitioned bears and dogs anywhere for her entertainment. (1565)

Margaret of Austria, aunt of Charles V. Elizabeth of England has received her due and there is no need to rehearse her superior arts of delay and defusion. But she should also be remembered as one of the most learned minds of her time, a character of the type traditionally called manly, and an expert organizer of public relations.

A good many other leading women in 16C politics could be mentioned. One more will suffice: the Catherine whose teenage marriage was mentioned above. She also has suffered in reputation from serving interests not to our taste. But as queen and queen mother of France she guided policies that upheld the royal prerogative and the integrity of the kingdom. She faced ruthless factions, including the Protestant Huguenot party. She is blamed for the massacre of the St. Bartholomew, but it is not clear that the responsibility is hers—and we never hear about the "Michelade," when the Huguenots massacred Catholics on St. Michael's day. [The book to read is Balzac's semi-fictional *Catherine de Médicis*.]

The many Italians who found a post at Catherine's court were resented as foreigners, but their influence under her leadership brought into French life many of the refinements from their homeland. (One odd trace of their presence is embalmed in the French language. Apparently in imitation of their speech, it became fashionable to pronounce *r*'s as *s*'s; so the French word for chair, originally and sensibly *chaire*, turned into present-day *chaise*.)

Turning to the gentler sort, we encounter another "pearl," Marguerite of Navarre (also d'Angoulême), sister of Francis I and protector of Rabelais. At her court in southwestern France she entertained a coterie of writers and thinkers of all persuasions, including for a time Calvin. She encouraged local trade and art, wrote poetry, and tried to reconcile Catholics and Huguenots. Her great work, *The Heptameron*, is a collection of 72 tales patterned after Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but original in mood and different from his by the

change in manners over two and a half centuries. It has been called "a masterpiece of pornography" and it is certainly erotic: all are stories about the tricks and turns of love affairs, mostly illicit. But the porn-monger of today would look in vain for the physical exploits that have become commonplace in high and low fiction.

Marguerite's contemporaries thought her "as good as she was beautiful and as brilliant as she was good," and her stories praise in all sincerity honorable love and chastity. The tales in which adultery, murder, or clerical concubinage are features of the entertainment are not fantasy for titillation; they could have been documented by the author from contemporary life. And when her tone is serious and the case is one of grave sin, retribution follows. Toward the end of the unfinished series—it was planned to number 100—she verges on a somber naturalism in which love is still a force but the erotic disappears. Her prose is among the best of its day, simple—there is no occasion for philosophical abstractions—and it is therefore lucid.

Marie de Gournay, the adoptive daughter of Montaigne (*she adopted him*), did go in for philosophy. She was a woman of prodigious erudition, hobnobbing in Paris with all the leading celebrities. She edited two enlarged editions of Montaigne's *Essays*, wrote a *Defense of Poetry*, a discourse *On the French Language*, a tract *On the Small Value of Noble Rank*. Most important, she wrote *The Equality of Men and Women*. In this, it must be added, she had the support of others, who were men, notably the German Cornelius Agrippa, who defended the "superexcellence of women." Marie tested her self-reliance by traveling across France alone to visit Montaigne's family and "console them" after his death.

No less striking is the personality of another 16C artist, Louise Labé, poet and musician, adept at horsemanship and other sports, who mastered several languages—all this after serving in the army with her father at the age of 16. Most remarkable at the time, she was of bourgeois origins and perhaps the first woman who gathered around her poets and artists to form a *salon*, the bourgeois equivalent of a court. Her writings include sonnets and elegies still anthologized and an unusual prose work, *The Debate Between Folly and Love*.

Louise Labé's counterpart in England, Lady Pembroke, has been duly celebrated. Edmund Spenser named her among the great contemporary poets. Known as Urania (the muse of astronomy), she was a patron of poets and playwrights. With her brother Philip Sidney she versified the Psalms and is thought to have introduced a note of feminism in his noble *Arcadia* (155>), as well as changed passages that were "too free."

Because all but one of these women belonged to the nobility it should not be supposed that artistic talent and managerial ability in women existed or had a chance to come into play only at the top of the social scale. There were—there always have been—hundreds of women in all ranks who were in

fact rulers—sometimes tyrants—of their entourage, as well as hundreds of others who wrote, sang to their own accompaniment, or practiced one or another of the ornamental crafts. The notion that talent and personality in women were suppressed at all times during our half millennium except the last fifty years is an illusion. Nor were all women previously denied an education or opportunities for self-development. Wealth and position were prerequisite, to be sure, and they still tend to be. The truth is that matters of freedom can never be settled in all-or-none fashion and any judgment must be comparative. Individual cases moreover show that what happens in a culture always differs in some degree from what is supposed to happen; possibilities are always greater than custom would dictate.

One standard for judging the status of women is the contemporary status of men. In the hierarchical society of the 16C and later, they too were deprived—of education, of openings for talent, of the means to leave the narrow space where they toiled—hence there was little or no lateral mobility, let alone vertical. In the Renaissance this constriction was greater than before because of the diminished prestige of the clergy. The Middle Ages had offered the humblest boy a chance to be educated and to rise to high posts in church and state. After the Reformation, laymen more and more filled these places. What John Stuart Mill in the 19C chose to call the subjection of women was thus matched for a long time by the subjection of men. And since Mill had in mind his own day, in which a good many women did emerge into public notice and power, a second mode of comparison might well be to measure their status against that of women in Mohammedan countries.

The cultural point here is not to condone the presence of obstacles to self-development, at any time, against anybody. It is to mark a difference between social norms and cultural actualities. If we see “the artist” emerge in the Renaissance as a self-directing individual who can say to his employer: “Hand’s off. Be quiet. I know my business better than you,” it implies that formerly he suffered “subjection”—to the employer *and* the guild. Nor did subjection completely disappear: the agent, the patron, and the public have continued to this day to limit and hinder artistic free will.

This is to say that cultural absolutes do not exist, pro or con. Nobody in the Renaissance circles so far looked at was shocked by the rise to eminence of the women whose mention here is far from closing the roster. The names of others are known and their lives recorded in detail; their deaths memorialized in poems, letters, and other expressions of praise and grief. The debate in *The Courtier* suggests that the reality was ahead of the stereotype and this fact was the spur to the arguments in defense of equality for the sexes.

Over our five centuries, the changes in social structure, economic life, and cultural expectations have worked fairly steadily toward EMANCIPATION and made INDIVIDUALISM a common form of SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS. The artist is

the conspicuous and congenial example. But free play for the self is still a goal to be achieved and not a gift. Under any system, whoever wants self-fulfillment must exert willpower over a long stretch of time, besides possessing talent and knowing how to manage it. And as is plain from daily experience, many who make this effort fail nonetheless and complain of "subjection." Meanwhile, the great majority feel no wish for public fame or self-expression, which does not mean that they are denied respect or some scope for their modest powers. The society in which everybody finds his or her proper level and due recognition has yet to be designed and made to work.