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The Renaissance Question

Few historical periods have elicited more discussion than the Renaissance. It defies easy categorization, confounds basic definition, and has thus remained a topic of vigorous debate. Scholars have contested virtually every aspect of it, from its causes and general characteristics, to its temporal and regional boundaries, to whether indeed the label is at all valid. The discourse has occasioned a vast literature that has only grown larger in subsequent years, with new approaches and techniques borrowed from anthropology, psychology, gender studies, and literary criticism.

The identification of the era as a distinct one dates back to the period itself, to the writings of contemporaries who were aware of their importance and priority. The key figure was Francis Petrarch (d. 1374), who consciously separated himself from the “barbarism” that preceded him, on the basis of his love and understanding of the classics. In *Letters on Familiar Matters*, Petrarch characterized the period from the adoption of Christianity by the Roman emperors in the fourth century up to his own age as one of “tenebrae” or “darkness.” In doing this Petrarch subverted the traditional notion among medieval Christian writers who associated the “dark age” with the period prior to the advent of Christianity. Petrarch made his determination on linguistic and cultural grounds, in terms of the good Latin and high culture of what he called “antique” Rome as opposed to the bad Latin and decline in learning in the later period.¹ Subsequent humanists, both in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, reinforced the distinction. Flavio Biondo (d. 1463) in his *History of Italy from the Decline of the Roman Empire (Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum imperii decades, 1439–53)* drew a clear chronological boundary between his own age and the thousand years that preceded it. He located Rome’s decline as beginning with the sack of city by Goths in 410 (which he erroneously dated as

412) and lasting until 1412, a period corresponding roughly to the modern concept of the Middle Ages. Matteo Palmieri (d. 1474) drew a still sharper contrast, depicting the era after the fall of Rome as culturally barren, about which he thought it was “best to be silent altogether.” Conversely, his own age was one of “majestic rhythm.” He praised his fellow Florentines Giotto (d. 1337) and Leonardo Bruni (d. 1444) as having restored arts and letters. A generation later, the great Dutch humanist Erasmus (d. 1536) remarked that everywhere “splendid talents are stirring.”²

Protestant writers of the Reformation further sharpened the distinction between the new and old age by associating the earlier period with the evils of the papacy and the church. They accused popes and scholastic theologians of subverting the true faith and encouraging the formation of a society based on superstition and ignorance. In this schema the Renaissance became a precursor to Reformation, which manifested itself by means of divine providence. Protestant scholars sought out tangible signs of God’s will. The English theologian John Foxe saw one such in the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor at Geneva, stressed the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and the arrival of Greek scholars in Italy. The interpretations of both men have cast long shadows on the subsequent secular literature.

The formulation of the modern concept of the Renaissance owes much to Rationalist and Romantic intellectual movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period during which historical studies became more systematized. Enlightenment writers stressed the notion of history as one of progress, of the evolution and development of society. The great French philosophe Voltaire (d. 1778) equated the Renaissance with the awakening of human reason and “Italian genius.” In his *Essay on the Manners and the Spirit of Nations* (1756), Voltaire drew parallels between the ancient Greeks and fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italians, pairing such figures as Guicciardini and Thucydides, Ariosto, and Homer, often to the advantage of the Italians. He portrayed Cosimo de’ Medici and his son Lorenzo as precursors to the enlightened despots of the eighteenth century, and Florence, their home, as an updated Athens. The Italian achievement was, however, coupled with a darker side of moral confusion and violence. “Intelligence, superstition, atheism, masquerades, poetry, treason, devotion, poison, assassinations, a few great men, an infinite number of clever and yet unfortunate scoundrels: that is what Italy was.”³

The Romantic historian Jules Michelet (d. 1874) gave wide currency to the term “Renaissance,” the title he used for the seventh volume of his *History of France* (1855).⁴ Michelet perceived of the Renaissance on a grander scale than Voltaire, as a European-wide phenomenon involving all aspects of life, characterized by the “discovery of the world and the discovery

of man,” a phrase that has gained a special place in the historiography of the period. Michelet singled out as prime features of the Renaissance the revival of antiquity, scientific discoveries and geographical exploration. The emphasis on the latter led him to perceive such men as Columbus and Copernicus as Renaissance figures.

Unlike Voltaire, however, Michelet did not focus on fifteenth-century Italy, but stressed instead the role of sixteenth-century France. The bridge between the two places was the French invasion of the peninsula in 1494, which brought Italian influences to France. The French Renaissance reached its apogee in the court of Francis I.

Michelet’s lasting achievement was to make the Renaissance into a concrete historical period. The notion of “rebirth” inherent in the term Renaissance was for Michelet above all a rebirth of the human spirit, a “heroic outburst of an immense will.” In this sense, even Martin Luther was a Renaissance figure insofar as the spirit of the age led him to the break with the Church.

It was, however, Michelet’s Swiss counterpart Jacob Burckhardt (d. 1897) who most set the modern terms of discussion. Burckhardt wove the various strands of Enlightenment and Romantic thought, as well as that of German philosophical-historical writers, into a powerful synthesis in his great book entitled *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. In the Enlightenment tradition, he identified the Renaissance as a period of progress and the emergence of reason.⁵ Like Voltaire, he located the Renaissance in Italy and called the Italians “the first born among the sons of Europe.” He stressed the role of “individualism,” which he equated with the appearance of the modern man and modern world.

The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy is so famous that its contents have often been assumed rather than carefully assayed. Scholarly refutations of the book have sometimes proceeded along lines that Burckhardt himself would not have recognized. For this reason it is worthwhile to look closely at its organization and argument.

What most interested Burckhardt was gaining access to the character of the age, pinpointing the “spirit” of the Renaissance. Burckhardt’s emphasis on individualism, and the key role played by great men bears the stamp of Hegel’s “*geistige Individualität*,” while his interest in uncovering the roots of modernity shares characteristics of the approach of his contemporary Karl Marx (d. 1883), who like Burckhardt was a student at the university of Berlin.⁶ Burckhardt nevertheless emphasized cultural rather than economic forces. Burckhardt self-effacingly called his work “*ein Versuch*” or “an attempt,” intended as an interpretation, short of employing all available evidence. He promised to follow with a separate treatment of art, which he felt warranted its own attention. But he never completed that work.

The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy is divided into six parts. The first two are the most widely read by modern students in the English speaking world. In them, Burckhardt traced the political circumstances in Italy. His main thesis is expressed in the famous subtitle of the first section, “The State as a Work of Art,” by which Burckhardt meant that the state was a “calculated conscious creation.” He depicted the Italian political environment as one of violence and uncertainty, which produced the individualism and egocentrism characteristic of the Renaissance. These traits were readily apparent in the great mercenary captains, the so-called *condottieri* of the fifteenth century, men of illegitimate birth, who by dint of their skill and cunning rose to leadership of armies and took over the states they served.

Burckhardt’s treatment of individualism is the central theme of the book, and constitutes his most original contribution. The concept is fully developed in the second part, “The Development of the Individual.” Here Burckhardt gives his oft-quoted description of the Middle Ages as “laying dreaming and half awake beneath a common veil.” The veil was composed of “faith, illusion and childish prepossession” and man perceived of himself only in terms of a general category, such as race, family, or corporation. It was in Italy that the veil melted away, replaced by the self-conscious individual, who recognized himself as such. The terms “individual” and “individualism” are, for Burckhardt, elastic ones, applied in various ways. At base they constitute dedication to self-interest and freedom from authority, both moral and political.

Burckhardt devoted the third part of his book to the revival of antiquity and the link between the Renaissance and the renewed interest in classical literature. He viewed the “spirit” of the Renaissance as prior to the intellectual renewal, embedded in the “genius of the Italian people” and not specifically reflected in the work of the humanists. The humanists were Renaissance men insofar as they reflected the traits of individualism and modernity.

In the last three parts, Burckhardt fleshed out the ways that individualism affected the age. The section entitled “The Discovery of the World and of Man” makes clear his debt to Michelet. It examines overseas exploration, scientific discovery, the natural world and literature. The section on “Society and Festivals” places the individual in his social setting. “Morality and Religion” presents a dark picture of “grave moral crisis” in Italy, which grew from the influence of pagan antiquity, difficulties within the church, and, above all, unbridled egoism.

Burckhardt’s great legacy was to present the Renaissance as an all-encompassing event, touching on varied aspects of life and society. His book took time to reach its audience, a development that Burckhardt himself lamented.⁷ It did not correspond to the dominant trends in contemporary German academia, which favored specialization and the learned monograph.⁸

But Burckhardt's ideas gained wide currency soon enough.⁹ The elegance of his writing had obvious appeal, as did the force of his argumentation. Moreover, there already existed considerable interest in the Renaissance throughout Europe. A year before the appearance of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, the German scholar Georg Voigt had published a multi-volume work on the humanist revival of antiquity (*Rediscovery of Classical Antiquity*, 1859), which, like Burckhardt, posited a decisive break between the Renaissance and the period that preceded it. Voigt also found a place for individuality, which was reflected in the work of humanist writers. Similarly, in Italy, the historian Pasquale Villari wrote of a distinctive Renaissance "spirit." In biographical works such as *The Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola* (1859–61) and *The Life and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli* (1877–82), Villari noted the individualistic nature of the period and the workings of Italian genius. Writing at a time of heightened nationalism owing to Italian reunification, Villari also condemned the moral and political corruption of the Renaissance, which he believed contributed to the peninsula's domination by foreign powers.

Burckhardt's work also found a receptive audience in the English-speaking world, where there was already substantial interest in the Renaissance, both in academic and non-academic circles.¹⁰ Much of the latter consisted of accounts by travelers, poets, and artists, often highly emotional in nature, who paid homage to the aesthetic beauties of the period.¹¹ At the turn of the eighteenth century, the wealthy Liverpool attorney William Roscoe published two biographies of the Medici family, on Lorenzo the Magnificent (1796) and Pope Leo X (1804). The books were printed in numerous editions and did much to popularize the great Renaissance family.

In America popular writers drew comparisons between the world of fifteenth-century Florence and their own. They saw in the earlier period the seeds of American society, specifically "modernity" for which America was now the paradigm. In England, where the study of the Renaissance was more professionalized, the art critic John Ruskin had already, by the time of the publication of Burckhardt's *Civilization*, written extensively on Renaissance art, which he did not admire. The literary critic Walter Pater (d. 1894) was then beginning his career and would, like Burckhardt, stress the importance of the Renaissance as a reflection of the general spirit of the age, and of fifteenth-century Italian society as its apotheosis.¹² But the Renaissance in England remained its own entity. The critic Matthew Arnold coined the term "Renesance" (in *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869), giving a distinctly English slant to the concept coming into vogue.¹³

The broad acceptance of the Burckhardtian Renaissance in the English-speaking world owed most to the work of John Addington Symonds. The son of a medical doctor, Symonds was what might be called today a freelance

scholar. He was notoriously neurotic, and spent much time in a Swiss health resort recovering from physical illness. He shared with Burckhardt an unabashed love for Italian culture and referred to the Renaissance as the “most marvelous period the world has ever known.” His magnum opus was a seven-volume work entitled *The Renaissance in Italy* (1875–86) that he initiated unaware of Burckhardt’s earlier work. This became known to Symonds as he was completing his book and he gratefully acknowledged his debt.

Symonds’s *Renaissance in Italy* is arranged in a manner similar to Burckhardt, although its central thesis is not so tightly organized. Symonds’s style is more rhetorical, a characteristic some attribute to the fact that he wrote at his health resort, which did not have a library.¹⁴ Like Burckhardt, Symonds equated the Renaissance with the emergence of modernity, whose salient characteristics were the birth of “liberty” and “political freedom,” the power of “self-determination,” recognition of the beauty of the outer world and of the body through art, the liberation of “reason” in science and “conscience” in religion and the restoration of the “culture to intelligence.”¹⁵ Symonds’s views have had a wide-ranging, if sometimes unacknowledged, influence on Anglo-American scholars, who have often conflated his ideas with those of Burckhardt.

Burckhardt’s tradition was passed down elsewhere, in various guises in historical works with varying agendas. Scholars extended his ideas, most notably in the areas of intellectual, social and economic history, where Burckhardt’s observations were more intuitive than comprehensive. Wilhelm Dilthey (d. 1911), a philosopher in the first instance, established a methodology for the study of intellectual life. He developed the notion of *Geisteswissenschaften*, sometimes translated as “intellectual (or human) sciences,” which treated ideas as dynamic and developing in their historical context. They were the product of the whole person, including his irrational side. There was therefore a close connection between the individual and the culture of an age, a notion with obvious parallels in Burckhardt, and which encouraged subsequent scholars to look for specific Renaissance intellectual trends. Dilthey’s influence is reflected in the work of Ernst Cassirer, who focused on fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy and saw in Renaissance intellectual life the seeds of modern science.¹⁶ Alfred von Martin and E. P. Cheyney closely examined economic and social trends. Von Martin affirmed Burckhardt’s individualistic tendencies with regard to Renaissance merchants or “bourgeois urban entrepreneurs” as he called them, who embodied the spirit of modern capitalism. Cheyney stressed the role of trade in the Renaissance and saw increased accumulation of wealth as the development that marked the passage from the medieval to modern world.¹⁷

Burckhardt’s influence also carried over to the fields of art history and literature, which had long been viewed as important aspects of the Renaissance, but which had been treated separately by scholars, detached

from broader historical processes. The effect of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was to bring the strands together, to encourage scholars to link their studies under the common rubric of cultural history, determined by the “spirit” of the age. In his three-volume *The History of Art during the Renaissance* (1889–95), Eugene Müntz, a follower of Burckhardt, described artistic achievements in terms of spirit of the Italian people. He emphasized the role of individuality and of man’s discovery of the world and himself.

It is important to emphasize, however, that even as Burckhardt became widely accepted, the Renaissance remained a highly contested and controversial construct. There existed concurrent interpretations, notably those that placed greater emphasis on the revival of antiquity. John Ruskin saw interest in the classical past as the essential feature of the Renaissance, which led to a substitution of pagan values for Christian values, a development he condemned.¹⁸ Even followers of Burckhardt did not always agree on details. The extension and amplification of the Swiss scholar’s ideas necessarily involved revision of them. Already in 1908, Karl Brandi spoke of a growing diversity of opinion and a “Renaissance problem.”¹⁹

An obvious problem with Burckhardt’s Renaissance was that it was limited to Italy. Where did this leave the Renaissance in other parts of Europe? There was no synthesis comparable to that of Burckhardt for Northern Europe. The discourse centered on the Reformation, for which the Renaissance was at best a precursor. The “traditional” interpretation (if it may be so judged) of the northern Renaissance emphasized three basic aspects: (1) its genesis in Italy and transmission, in altered form, northward; (2) the importance of humanism and interest in antiquity; and (3) its fundamentally modern quality. The influence of Burckhardt is apparent with regard to points one and three. But scholars tended to focus more on detailed features of the movement rather than search for a guiding spirit.

The extension of a Renaissance to France was perhaps most natural. It followed directly from Michelet, who located it in the sixteenth century, beginning with the French invasion of Italy in 1494. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars emphasized a French “discovery of Italy,” of its culture and intellectual trends that in turn stimulated “native” genius. This genius, according to G. Lanson, manifested itself primarily in literature and art.²⁰ The former included the work of humanists, for which the court of King Francis I served as a locus of activities.

The application of the term Renaissance to England was more limited. Scholars associated it largely with literary developments, particularly the work of William Shakespeare (1564–1616). In *History of English Literature* (1863–4), Hippolyte Taine established a precedent by affixing the label (which he divided into the “pagan” and “Christian” Renaissance) to the

period starting with Edmund Spenser (1552–1599) and ending with John Milton (1608–1674). The chronology remains popular in English literature departments at American universities. The critic C. S. Lewis denied, however, the existence of a literary Renaissance in the sixteenth century, stressing the prolongation of medieval trends in England. Historians have meanwhile linked the Renaissance to the Tudor/Stuart monarchies. But they too have emphasized continuity with the Middle Ages as well as English exceptionalism, treating the monarchies for their own sake rather than in terms of broad European-wide movements. The influential historian G. R. Elton accepted the utility of the term Renaissance for literature, but rejected its relevance as applied to society and politics.²¹ He preferred the term “early modern” for the latter.

The notion of a German Renaissance was slow in forming. Despite the central role played by German speaking scholars in the development of the concept, there was little impulse to apply the term to a region so closely associated with the Reformation. Paul Joachimsen, writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, claimed that the Renaissance in German lands was “mere mummery,” imitative of Italy.²² He nevertheless did much of the practical work of establishing a connection to Italy in his study of the early German humanists Rudolf Agricola (1443–1485) and Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522), whom he saw as inspired by their Italian forebears. Later scholarship would place less emphasis on the derivative aspects of German humanism and more on novelty, particularly with respect to religion. This has allowed for tighter connections between the Renaissance and the Reformation (see chapter 4).

The Revolt of the Medievalists

The most strident challenges to Burckhardt’s claims, however, came from “below,” from medievalists. They disputed Burckhardt’s negative depiction of the Middle Ages as a period “hidden under a veil,” characterized by superstition and corporate religious affiliation. They argued instead that Renaissance qualities such as rationality and individuality existed earlier. Where Burckhardt posited a fundamental break in history, medievalists saw continuities. Dissent gained momentum in the first decades of the twentieth century and was dubbed by the historian Wallace K. Ferguson “the revolt of the medievalists,” a name that has stuck.²³

The revision was led by two notable scholars, the Dutch historian Johann Huizinga and his American counterpart Charles Homer Haskins. Huizinga’s critique was largely implicit. Using evocative language and imagery, he demonstrated in his book *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) how some of the

features of Burckhardt's Renaissance in Italy were also operative in the Burgundian Netherlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Huizinga found similar artistic virtuosity and a desire for fame and honor. But these were bound up not with modern sensibilities but with the quintessential medieval ethic of chivalry and response to the devastating effects of the Black Death in 1348. For Huizinga the period was, in Burgundy and France, the "autumn of the Middle Ages."²⁴

Charles Homer Haskins dealt with Burckhardt more explicitly, tracing several of the Swiss historian's assertions back to the twelfth century. Haskins gave his book the provocative title *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927). He argued that the twelfth century, "the very century of Saint Bernard and his mule," was "fresh, vigorous" and innovative. He cited as evidence the advent of new artistic styles, (Romanesque and Gothic), the emergence of vernacular literature, revival of interest in the classics, recovery of Greek science and the beginning of universities and new legal systems. He made clear that the twelfth-century Renaissance was an international movement and thus broad in scope.

Huizinga's and Haskins's works have achieved a fame and influence comparable to that of Burckhardt. Their overall aims were, however, measured. Neither writer denied the existence of the Renaissance, but wished only to minimize its inflated importance. Huizinga accepted Burckhardt's claims for Italy.²⁵ Haskins made clear in his introduction that he intended only to show that the "Renaissance was not so unique or so decisive as has been supposed" and that conversely the Middle Ages was "less dark and static."²⁶ Likewise, it is important not to overstress the originality of the two historians. Their interest in the earlier period had roots in the work of prior scholars. For all his interest in the Renaissance, Jules Michelet, for example, gave at least as much attention to the Middle Ages and emphasized the achievements of several figures from the period, including the mystic Joachim da Fiore. The nineteenth-century scholar Paul Sabatier wrote at length about the life and deeds of Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), the founder of the Franciscan movement, stressing Francis's humanity and individuality, his awareness of nature and beauty, his discovery, if you will, "of the world and man."²⁷ Sabatier's Francis was not a Renaissance man per se, but he was an innovator, a rebel against rigid church authority and in that sense a "modern man," a depiction with obvious Burckhardian overtones. Sabatier's interpretation found its way into later works, particularly those of art historians, and remains current.

Other medievalists, however, undertook more virulent critiques of Burckhardt. Étienne Gilson saw no value at all in the Renaissance label, claiming that the period created nothing new and was actually less vibrant than the Middle Ages. For him the Renaissance was "not the Middle Ages plus man," but "the Middle Ages minus God" and "in losing God the

Renaissance was losing man himself.” Lynn Thorndike expressed similar contempt. He asserted, contra Ernst Cassirer, that the “so-called Renaissance” (as he called it) saw no advances in the sciences, but was in fact strikingly inferior to the Middle Ages in that regard.²⁸

It was, however, Burckhardt’s claims to individuality and modernity that evoked the most sustained criticism from medievalists. Following in Haskins’s tradition, R. W. Southern in several important and widely read books characterized the twelfth century as one in which there were the stirrings of rational thought and the rehabilitation of nature. He emphasized the careers of great “individuals” such as Peter Blois, Guibert of Nogent, and John of Salisbury and used the term “medieval humanism” to describe their work, which has gained wide currency. Similarly, Joseph Reese Strayer, who studied with Haskins, posited the origins of the modern state in the Middle Ages, outlining the growth of royal bureaucracies and the development of “modern” law and legal systems already in the twelfth century.²⁹

Some scholars pushed the revival back still further, finding “Renaissances” in the monastic culture of Northumbria in the seventh century, the court of Charlemagne in the eighth and ninth centuries, and the circle of the German Ottonian Emperors in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³⁰ The proliferation of Renaissances occasioned Erwin Panofsky’s well-known attempt to distinguish among them. He described the medieval versions as “Renaissances,” which were limited in scope and effect and thus mere forebears to the Burckhardtian Italian Renaissance, which was truly broad-based and transformative.³¹

Medievalist claims to modernity have nevertheless persisted. Colin Morris gave a particularly strong statement on behalf of the twelfth-century roots of individualism in his often reprinted (by the Medieval Academy of America) *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (1985). Drawing primarily on literary sources, Morris argued that the advent of individualism in the twelfth century was a transformative event, a wholly “unique western phenomenon” such that it represented “an eccentricity among cultures.”³² The thesis deprived Burckhardt’s Renaissance of any priority, and indeed effectively eliminated it altogether.

Morris’s hyperbole exposes the risks involved in the search for modernity. Morris argues against a phantom, laying out the “conventional” Burckhardtian account of individualism that Burckhardt would not in fact have recognized. Indeed, it was not taken from Burckhardt, but from Bishop Stephen Neill, an obscure nineteenth-century textbook writer. The effort to defeat this straw man leads Morris to overstate his claims for modernity – to exceed the excesses of Burckhardt, who wrote at a time when systematic study of the Middle Ages had not yet begun.

More recent scholarship has questioned notions of medieval modernity. Influenced by poststructural and postmodern historiographical trends,

historians have shown greater reluctance to read the present into the past. In an important review article, Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel traced the recent tendency among medievalists (since the late 1970s) to avoid teleological searches for modernity in favor of attempts to understand the period on its own terms. Rather than finding analogues with the present day, scholars have placed emphasis on “alterity,” often extremes in behavior such as aberrant sexual practices, demonic rites and, more generally, medieval fascination with things that were grotesque and strange. As we shall see, similar trends have also influenced scholarship on the Renaissance.

The “revolt of the medievalists” nevertheless had a profound and lasting effect on the discourse regarding the Renaissance. At base, it made scholars more aware of the realities of the earlier period and more inclined to view events that occurred during the Renaissance in terms of it. Today, there is hardly a textbook on the Renaissance in the English language that does not begin with disclaimers about the importance of the Middle Ages or with chapters devoted to the “medieval heritage.”³³ Standard Renaissance figures like Petrarch are treated in terms of their medieval context; signal Renaissance works like Castiglione’s *Courtier* or Machiavelli’s *Prince* are studied in terms of medieval literature, the former with respect to the literature on courtly love, the latter in terms of medieval “mirror” books of advice to rulers.³⁴

The accommodation of revision did not entail any less commitment to the Renaissance as its own unique age. William Bouwsma spoke of historians “sorting data into two heaps, one marked “continuities,” the other “innovations.”³⁵ If the Middle Ages had its own unique characteristics, so too did the Renaissance, sufficient to distinguish it from its predecessor. The Renaissance was a period of “accelerated” transition, in which earlier trends moved more quickly and more decisively toward modernity.

The challenge of medievalists also encouraged Renaissance scholars to look more closely at the issue of periodization. Burckhardt did not arrange his work in chronological order, preferring a thematic approach. Temporally he drew his examples from the period from Emperor Frederick II in the mid-thirteenth century to the sack of Rome in 1527. The chronology overlapped the claims of medievalists. Huizinga’s Middle Ages occurred in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Where was the dividing line, was it the same in each country? Where did one place ambiguous figures such as Dante, who, according to the famous mixed metaphor, stood with one foot in the Middle Ages and “saluted the rising star of the Renaissance” with the other?³⁶

The problem of periodization has proved singularly vexing. The “professionalization” of historical studies in modern times has only exacerbated the issue, as university course catalogs and academic affiliations have necessitated the drawing of distinct temporal lines of division among historical

fields and encouraged scholars to fit their subjects into neat self-contained packages. John Hale has suggested that the packages may correspond to a basic human impulse to align the historical past with the contours of our own lives, which are necessarily bounded. In any case, periodization remains a pervasive if often unacknowledged problem. We shall deal with the issue more extensively below.³⁷

“Golden Age” and “Problem Child”

The study of the Renaissance in the English-speaking world received a sharp stimulus during the 1930s and 1940s. The rise of fascism in Europe created an exodus of scholars, many of whom were Jewish, fleeing religious persecution. The émigrés included Hans Baron, Erwin Panofsky, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ernst Kantorowicz, and Felix Gilbert, who went to America; Nicolai Rubinstein and Ernst Gombrich, who went to England.³⁸ The Italian Roberto Lopez, deprived of his academic post in Genoa, found an intellectual home at Yale University. Although the men did not all agree with Burckhardt, they were strongly influenced by him. German scholars brought with them the rich historical tradition of their country, including the approaches of Hegel (1831), Ranke (1886), and Dilthey (1911), as well as those of Karl Lamprecht (1915), Friedrich Meinecke (1954), and others. Following in the path of their intellectual predecessors, they treated the Renaissance in broad terms, using it as a means to search for greater understanding of the historical processes – the approach that inspired Burckhardt.

The émigrés showed particular interest in politics and political forms. Hans Baron and Felix Gilbert drew inspiration from Meinecke, who saw in the Renaissance the beginnings of republicanism and modern democratic ideology. Their work corresponded well with prevailing attitudes in Britain and America, engaged in war with Hitler and the axis powers, during which the ideals of liberal democracy were at stake.³⁹ Hans Baron argued that republicanism emerged in Florence in the early fifteenth century as a direct consequence of war with the Milanese tyrant Giangaleazzo Visconti, whom he compared to Hitler (and Napoleon).⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Paul Oskar Kristeller focused on intellectual trends, most notably humanism. His presence at Columbia University inspired numerous doctorates in the field. Robert Lopez at Yale encouraged wide interest in economic history. Lopez (d. 1987) reversed the long-accepted notion, implicit in Burckhardt, that there was a connection between economic prosperity and the cultural achievements of the Renaissance. He argued instead that the flourishing of the arts derived from economic “hard times” resulting from the Black Death in 1348. The Lopez thesis, as it came to be called, touched off a heated debate and moved

the study of the economy, from the margins to the center of the scholarly discourse (see chapter 5).

The stimulus provided by the émigrés brought the study of the Renaissance to what was called “a golden age.” The Renaissance emerged not only as an important moment in European civilization, but as the *key* moment. The opening of European archives after the World War II further stimulated research and facilitated a range of empirical studies, which filled in details of larger theoretical issues.⁴¹ In 1958, Federico Chabod published a “preliminary” bibliography of the literature that ran for 48 pages.⁴²

The profusion of studies and approaches, however, further complicated the picture. Wallace K. Ferguson, dubbed by Lopez as the “umpire” of post-war Renaissance historiography, devoted his career to producing what he called a “comprehensive synthesis.” He called the Renaissance the “most intractable problem child of historiography.” But his tone was nevertheless optimistic, reflecting the great interest in the subject and its assured status in the historical canon. He advocated a systematic analysis, which was meaningful only if applied to all of Europe.⁴³ Ferguson saw dispute as arising from narrow scholarly concentration on a single aspect or region.⁴⁴ He argued that while the rate of change varied from one place to another, the accrual of slow increments ultimately produced major transformations. Ferguson’s work formed the basis of many subsequent monographs as well as numerous textbooks. His contribution has, however, often gone unacknowledged and for that reason is stated here at some length.

According to Ferguson, a fundamental precondition for study of the Renaissance was acceptance of the notion of periodization, which he affirmed by restating the philosopher R. G. Collingwood’s dictum that it represented “the mark of advanced and mature historical thought.”⁴⁵ Ferguson set the precise if admittedly arbitrary years for the period as lasting from 1300 to 1600. Following the Germanic historical tradition, Ferguson saw the Renaissance as constituting a basic shift in *Weltanschauung* (world view). The shift began in the fourteenth century and was characterized by a transformation of the economy from an agrarian to a commercial one; of politics from feudal arrangements to centralized government, of religion from the unity of Catholic worship to Protestantism, and, finally, of the emergence of secular learning and natural science. Ferguson retained Burckhardt’s claims to modernity and saw Italy as the focal point of change, from whence the Renaissance radiated out to the rest of Europe and included advances in music, theater, art, and science.

Ferguson’s schema remains evident in North American textbooks, which are often arranged in a similar manner, both structurally and thematically. This is especially apparent in those written in the 1960s and 1970s, which are still used in American classrooms.⁴⁶ The importance of the textbooks should not be understated, as they are the means by which students gain

their first impression of the Renaissance, impressions that are often enduring, even among those who go on to become scholars.

Cultural and Literary Turns

The broad scholarly synthesis advocated by Ferguson did not, however, occur. The postwar impulse toward consensus gave way to skepticism. The shift coincided with changing political and social attitudes. The mid/late sixties and early seventies were a time of questioning the “establishment,” of increased concern with social causes and injustice, with civil rights and political protest. This reflected itself in the academy, where scholars moved away from traditional topics such as the study of elites in favor of subjects that were not part of the standard canon.

Accordingly, the “revolt” this time came primarily from scholars interested in social issues. The French *Annales* School provided an important impetus. It stressed treating history in its totality, as an integrated whole that functioned on multiple levels.⁴⁷ It de-emphasized the deeds of great men, and focused more on structures and the broad spectrum of human existence. The school grew from the journal, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre back in 1929. It gained institutional status after World War II under the guidance of Fernand Braudel, who brought it temporarily to the Renaissance. His pioneering *Philip II and the Mediterranean* (published in French in 1949 and translated into English in 1974) dealt with the sixteenth century, with the Mediterranean as a whole, emphasizing physical and man-made structures rather than elite culture. Braudel stressed the *longue durée*, the long view of historical time, corresponding to geographical and demographic rhythms.

The approach privileged social and economic developments over politics. Annaliste scholars such as Ernest Labrousse and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie went further in the direction of social history. They examined more closely the masses and advocated the study of them through quantification of “serial” data such as grain prices, which revealed the monotony of their existence.⁴⁸

Historians also borrowed techniques from the fields of sociology and anthropology, especially from the work of Clifford Geertz. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz argued for the primacy of culture in understanding human society. Man is what he does and thus can be properly apprehended only by close examination of his cultural context. This involves interpreting signs and rituals, which allow access to meaning within the culture itself. Geertz used the term “thick description” to describe this detailed analysis of human behavior in its cultural context.⁴⁹

Geertz's work, along with that of Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, provided historians with the tools to apprehend everyday life and behavior.⁵⁰ This has proven especially useful at gaining access to Renaissance religious practices, a hitherto much-neglected area of study. Geertz differed fundamentally with Enlightenment writers, who treated human nature as constant and readily identifiable in history. If human nature did not exist apart from its culture, it was now more difficult to read oneself back into history.⁵¹

Inspired by Geertz, the literary critic Stephen Greenblatt took direct aim at Burckhardt's concept of individuality. In his studies of sixteenth-century English literature, Greenblatt argued that there was no objective self. The individual was a "cultural artifact," formed by political, cultural, and social forces.⁵² The self was thus constructed or "fashioned" in interaction with outside forces. This "new historicist" school, as Greenblatt and his followers have been called, drew also upon the "poststructural" approach of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (d. 1984), who denied the existence of an objective self as well as the coherency of historical categories.

A further methodological challenge to Burckhardt came from social historians interested in women and sexuality. In an essay written in 1977, Joan Kelly posed the provocative question: "Did women have a Renaissance?" She took as her starting point Burckhardt's famous but unqualified statement that "women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men." Kelly's answer was negative. She argued that the same economic and political opportunities that improved the lives of men had an adverse effect on women, that women's status actually fell with respect to their medieval counterparts.⁵³

Kelly's essay served as a starting point for the study of Renaissance women. She focused on noble and upper-class women. Subsequent scholars examined the lower classes and more marginal figures. Joan Scott pioneered a new approach, which explored gender, how society constructed the notions of what it was to be male or female. In her essay "Gender, a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Scott advocated an integrated program of study whereby gender became a category like race and class. Like other social historians, she relied on techniques of anthropology, literary studies, and sociology.⁵⁴

The new categories produced new studies. Scholars sought out empirical evidence in European archives. They examined a range of non-elite, nontraditional topics, such as working-class people, magicians, prostitutes, the homeless, and indigent.⁵⁵ The state archive in Florence was a particularly popular destination for study. Its rich collection of documentary material includes the famous tax assessment, the *catasto* (1427), from which it was possible to reconstruct much of the social world of that important city. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber gave a detailed analysis of the document in their book, *Les Toscans et leurs familles* (1978) (translated into

English in 1985 as *Tuscans and their Families*). The work bears the obvious influence of the Annales School and its interest in quantifying data (Klapisch-Zuber is in fact a student of Braudel). But the authors relied also on a new tool of historical study, the computer, to process the data.⁵⁶

The intense interest in social history, with recovering the lives of the so-called “lost people,” gave rise in the 1970s and 1980s to the study of microhistory. Microhistory began in the Italian academy and was linked, like the Annales School, to a journal (*Quaderni storici*).⁵⁷ The aim of its proponents was to produce ethnographic histories of everyday life by studying the individual in his or her social setting. Rather than examine large amounts of quantifiable data, scholars looked at a few sources or even a single text, a legal case or trial record. The technique has been viewed as the antithesis of Annales, and indeed was posed as such by its main adherent, Carlo Ginzburg, who expressed frustration at the annaliste accumulation of data and his desire to create an indigenous Italian social history in its place. In truth, however, microhistory developed more as an extension of Annales, the culmination of trend within it toward more regional and local studies. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, advocate of analysis of long term serial data, himself wrote a microhistory, about the southern French town of *Montaillou*, from inquisition records, which allowed him to “see the world in a grain of sand.”⁵⁸

Microhistorical studies remain popular in England, Italy, and America. They include, Ginzburg’s own *The Cheese and the Worms*, (published originally as *Il formaggio e vermi, il cosmo di un mugnaio del 500*, 1976, and translated into English in 1980), which told the story of a sixteenth-century Italian miller whose heretical views on the nature of the cosmos landed him before the inquisition; Natalie Zemon Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), about an imposter who returned from war in France; Judith Brown’s *Immodest Acts* (1986), about a lesbian nun in an Italian convent; Edward Muir’s *Mad Blood Stirring* (1997), about feuding in the Friuli region of Italy, and, most recently, William J. Connell and Giles Constable’s, *Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence* (2005), about a Florentine nobleman who hurled dung at a fresco of the Virgin Mary after a bad run of gambling at a local tavern.⁵⁹

At the same time that historians illuminated uncharted social worlds, they also called into question the cultural and intellectual primacy traditionally accorded Italy. Rather than stress a straight-line transmission of the Renaissance from Italy to other parts of Europe, scholars changed the polarities. They looked at the flow of ideas and innovation in both directions. They demonstrated, for example, how new techniques of oil painting devised in fifteenth-century Netherlands were transferred to Italy and how the works of humanist writers were altered as they were translated into other languages and disseminated throughout Europe (see chapter 4). In this, historians have drawn on “reception theory,” a school of literary criticism

associated with the University of Constance in Germany (1970s). Reception theorists advocated shifting the emphasis from the producer of the text and the text itself to the receiver and the receiver's relationship to the text.⁶⁰ The historian Peter Burke has been among the most forceful in applying this to the Renaissance. Rather than distinguish between Italy and the rest of Europe, Burke has stressed the dynamic interaction among cultures.⁶¹

Such approaches left little space for the Renaissance as traditionally understood. Viewed from the perspective of the masses, history was, in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's words, "motionless." Little or nothing changed for those living in the countryside from the eleventh century until the Industrial Revolution. Standard periodizations therefore had no meaning. This was likewise the point of Joan Kelly's argument, which cast doubt on whether the same periodization could be applied to both men and women. The challenge brought into question the "Whig" progressive view inherited from the Enlightenment that treated history as a meaningful unfolding of events, arranged into neat, self-contained eras.

Historians readjusted their horizons. Where Wallace Ferguson had called for broad synthesis in the 1950s, scholars now advocated "selectivity" and more restricted terms.⁶² Even enthusiastic proponents of the Renaissance such as Denys Hay called for limited interpretations. In the second edition of *The Italian Renaissance in its Historical Background* (1976) he stated that the Renaissance, and the past more generally, seldom dealt in "transformation scenes."⁶³ Robert Lopez in 1970 took to task historians who overstated the Renaissance by means of shifting geographical focus. He criticized Erwin Panofsky for exaggerating the originality of Italian artists by means of comparison with their medieval German forebears. A more apt approach was to compare artistic styles within a single place. In Florence, Lopez noted, the progression from medieval to Renaissance was far more gradual, evidenced by the early Romanesque facade of San Miniato, the Gothic belfry of Santa Maria del Fiore and the Renaissance front of Santa Maria Novella.⁶⁴

The art historian Ernst Gombrich advocated disposing of the Renaissance period marker altogether and replacing it with the term "movement" (1974). Gombrich described the Renaissance movement as "something proclaimed" by its participants and proponents, which by its very nature attracted "fanatics and hangers on," but also had its share of opponents and "neutral outsiders." This helped account for self-awareness of the first Renaissance figures, the widespread fervor they and their followers caused, as well as the contradictory trends.⁶⁵

Gombrich's interpretation has influenced scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. It is evident in the work of Peter Burke, who has by degrees come to refine it further, defining the Renaissance most recently as "an organizing concept which has its uses."⁶⁶

Some go still further, advocating the elimination altogether of the term Renaissance, replacing it with “early modern.” They argue that the latter label, already in use in the nineteenth century, is more egalitarian, more suited to inclusion of the “vast sea” of human activity. The term Renaissance is inherently elitist and value-laden, associated with western chauvinism and claims of superiority.⁶⁷ Conversely, “early modern,” is more congruent with the backgrounds of many modern scholars themselves, who, unlike previous generations, less often come from the upper-class elite.⁶⁸

Early modern has gained popularity, particularly among literary critics and historians of Northern Europe. But the label is not without its own problems. If, as advocates proclaim, it offers an escape from Burckhardt’s emphasis on elite culture, it does not avoid the great Swiss historian’s teleological stress on modernity. In this sense, it is no less value laden than the term Renaissance, and is no real alternative to the traditional narrative schema of history. Indeed, it accentuates the notion of modernity, encouraging scholars to elongate the period, to push it forward temporally, closer to the present day. As the “revolt of the medievalists” brought attention to the beginnings of the era, the shift to the early modern heading has often led to focus on finding the end point. The endpoint is in turn located in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and has led scholars to view the period more closely in terms of our own world.

The term “early modern” has in any case not always been applied uniformly. Historians often juxtapose it with Renaissance, using the two words as synonyms, without openly acknowledging the fact. They apply Renaissance more narrowly to Italian developments, and early modern to non-Italian developments. Intellectual and artistic trends such as humanism are placed under the rubric of Renaissance, while politics, especially the formation of nation states, is placed under the heading early modern. The shifts add to the confusion.

Pessimism, Accommodation, and the Public Domain

The revisions appeared to threaten the existence of the Renaissance as a viable historical field. In 1978, William Bouwsma, then president of the American Historical Association, judged the Renaissance to be on the “point of collapse.” He noted a shift from “skepticism” of the central claims of Renaissance scholarship to “agnosticism and even indifference” and claimed that the subject had become “little more than an administrative convenience.”⁶⁹ In addition to the new socially based research, Bouwsma pointed to a general philosophical turn in the academy toward poststructural and

postmodern approaches that denied historical continuity and the intelligibility of such things as modernity. He cited in particular the influence of Michel Foucault and his denial of basic historical categories and patterns.⁷⁰ The Renaissance became the keynote of an outdated, chauvinistic mode of history, the grand narrative with a “single plot,” whose purpose was to demonstrate the superiority of western culture.

But the Renaissance has proved remarkably resilient. For one thing, not all scholars have accepted the revisionist scholarship. They continue to use the traditional well-worn rubrics. Indeed, the historiography of the Renaissance is, like the period itself, filled with divergent patterns. Opposing trends exist side by side seemingly unaffected by each other. Some historians attack the *Annales* concept of history, accusing it of substituting an apocalyptic myth of modernization for the ideal of continuous development. Others denounce the postmodern inclination to see the Renaissance as “half-alien,” arguing that the chief value of historical study is its ability to tell us something about ourselves.⁷¹ Lisa Jardine’s highly acclaimed *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* follows unapologetically in the tradition of Burckhardt, positing modernity in the Renaissance. “The world we inhabit today [...] is a world which was made in the Renaissance.”⁷² Conversely, Robin Kirkpatrick’s recent textbook on Renaissance Europe begins with a series of qualifications carefully outlining the limits of the Renaissance, which was neither strikingly original nor modern. Kirkpatrick drew heavily on literary and philosophical trends such as reception theory and the work of Foucault.⁷³

An important factor in the persistence of the Renaissance is its currency with the non-academic public. Burckhardt’s enduring appeal owes in part to the fact that he viewed Renaissance Italy in the manner of an excited tourist. It is this same impulse that has induced people from around the world to travel to Florence, Venice and others places where the effects of the Renaissance, notably the work of artists and architects, are most apparent. The images keep alive the period, stimulate the imagination, as they did earlier for John Addington Symonds, William Roscoe, Robert Browning, and others. Popular culture has afforded the Renaissance a “stable niche,” which has included reproductions of famous artwork on refrigerator magnets and calendars and the application of the term for hotel chains and urban renewal projects.⁷⁴ The Renaissance in short transcends the scholarly world and thus resists scholarly attempts to do away with it. It resides in the public domain, where it remains an attractive synonym for progress. A recently discovered protein was given the name “renaissance,” on the grounds that it had “multifarious functions” – a sort of a biological “*uomo universale*” in the Burckhardtian sense.⁷⁵

The public Renaissance is booming. And despite the preferences of some professional scholars, public perceptions and popular opinion do affect the

academy. Wealthy dilettantes, with often narrow interest in elite culture, have endowed fellowships and grants, which facilitate access to archives and libraries that have made possible the very studies that have challenged the Renaissance label. Mainstream presses continue to solicit and publish books on the Renaissance for a popular market. Similarly, university presses, despite their attention to more specialized topics and greater insulation from commercial pressures, have sometimes encouraged the use of the term Renaissance for the sake of sales. The “lay” interest has in short helped keep relevant the subject and the label.

Even those scholars who have studied ostensibly non-Renaissance topics have often worked comfortably under the label. Margaret King used the term for her book on women (*Women of the Renaissance*, 1991) and in her recent textbook described the Renaissance as of “such tremendous importance that students [...] should devote an entire semester to its study.”⁷⁶ Numerous others recent books have used the label despite dealing with non-traditional topics. These include J. R. Mulryne, *Court Festivals of the European Renaissance* (2000); Julian Yates, *Error, Misuse, Failure: Object Lessons from the English Renaissance* (2000); Lu Ann Homza, *Religious Authority in the Spanish Renaissance* (2000); Ian Maclean, *Logic, Signs and Nature: Learned Medicine in the Renaissance* (2001); Joanne Ferraro, *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice* (2001); Andrew Landis and William Eiland, *Visions of Holiness: Art of Devotion in Renaissance Italy* (2001).⁷⁷

It should not be assumed, however, that the authors were directly responsible for their titles. As professional historians know all too well, the determination is often made by the press, and has more than once been the subject of considerable tension between author and editor.

Nevertheless, what have sometimes been called “anti-Renaissance” trends by their opponents have in fact often stimulated research, opening up new vistas rather than closing them. The new historicist interpretation of individuality has, for example, encouraged study of the self in its broader historical context. It has provided a means for understanding the often ambiguous and crafted behavior of Renaissance figures and has helped reanimate discussions of style of living, civility, and politeness. Even Foucault, who posed a seemingly insurmountable challenge to the traditional historical method, has found a place in Renaissance historiography. Scholars have taken up subjects that he studied, including insanity, criminality, and sexuality. They employ Foucault’s notions of power, its exercise through language and symbol and importance in human relations.⁷⁸

It is thus possible to accept elements of postmodernism and remain an enthusiastic proponent of the Renaissance.⁷⁹ Freed from the strictures of demonstrating progress and modernity, scholars have juxtaposed traditionally antithetical categories such as the secular and religious worlds, wealth

and poverty, rationality and irrationality. They have placed philosophy and magic more surely in the context of Renaissance intellectual trends, the former including continued interest in Aristotle.⁸⁰ In shifting away from emphasis on elites, scholars have employed more egalitarian language and categories. In her recent history of the Renaissance, Alison Brown replaced the old rubric “rebirth of interest in classics” with a new category, “passions and enthusiasms” that connected Renaissance love of classical learning with book collecting and interest in non-canonical works and non-intellectual frontiers. Scholars have “de-centered” the Renaissance in order to better relativize European Christian culture in terms of Islam, Byzantium, and Judaism.⁸¹ They have situated Europe in a “global” context, in terms of the New World and the East, reaching as far as China and the Indian subcontinent.⁸² They have stressed the cultural and economic interactions, cross-influences on Renaissance art, architecture, fashions, and consumption.⁸³

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that the new scholarship has wholly superseded Burckhardt or that the work of the Swiss historian has been, as one recent author put it, “hopelessly shattered.” Scholars continue to use Burckhardt as the authority against which to position and thus validate their work. In that sense Burckhardt shall perhaps always remain relevant, and “Burckhardt bashing” will continue to be an “Oedipal ritual” among contemporary scholars.⁸⁴ Many of the original debates arising from his work remain operative, transformed into new guises. The current emphasis on culture is in keeping with Burckhardt’s most fundamental aim, to treat culture as that which “moves the world” and is conditioned by historical circumstance.⁸⁵ Sometimes lost in the stereotype that has become Burckhardt is that he incorporated into his analysis aspects of everyday life, including games, humor, and dance. His interest in festivals does not set him so far apart from those now studying ritual. Burckhardt’s focus on violence and eye for lurid detail have remained popular among social historians, whose work is now more grounded in a social, anthropological, and linguistic context and applied to a broader sector of society, including middle and lower classes.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, Burckhardt’s notion of the discovery of the world and man is reflected in the recent work of historians of science, who stress the Renaissance “fascination with nature” with “wondrous” phenomena. John J. Martin has argued broadly in favor of retaining Burckhardt’s claim for the modernity of the Renaissance on the grounds that it suited well the world that Burckhardt inhabited. It seems inappropriate today only because our world is a postmodern one.⁸⁷

This convergence of the old and new is perhaps most evident in John Hale’s recent history of the Renaissance. The title of the book, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, is conscious homage to Burckhardt. Like the Swiss historian, Hale defines the period as one in which there emerged a

“new and pervasive attitude” and “dramatic changes in fortune.” But Hale organizes his discussions and chapters into categories more in line with the current discourse. He speaks of Renaissance “passions” and “receptions,” and treats western developments in terms of other cultures.⁸⁸

A New Beginning and “Enviably Position”

The result is that at present the Renaissance remains a dynamic topic. The pessimism of the late 1970s has been replaced by greater optimism. Edward Muir in his essay “Italian Renaissance in America” (1995) claimed that Renaissance historians were in “an enviable position.”⁸⁹ Peter Burke, after excusing himself for yet another book on the Renaissance (1998), asserted that there “were never so many people writing on different aspects” of the subject.⁹⁰ Randolph Starn, in the Josephine Waters Bennett lecture presented to the Renaissance Society of America in 2006, spoke of “widening the margins” of research and “accommodating turns in the workaday agendas” of scholars.⁹¹

But if the Renaissance is flourishing, it is doing so without a new synthesis to take Burckhardt’s place. The trend among scholars has been to tread lightly, to avoid, as one historian wrote, “universality like the plague.” This may indeed reflect the historical profession as a whole. It is nevertheless more difficult to speak of consensus or general agreement. There have been few attempts to provide an overview or even a review of historiographical developments.

Consequently, old problems of definition and periodization persist, and indeed have only grown worse. Some retain Wallace K. Ferguson’s dating of the period, from 1300 to 1600.⁹² Others do not. Margaret King’s recent book traces the Renaissance from 1350 to 1700; Stella Fletcher uses the years 1390 to 1530; while John Martin prefers 1350 to 1650.⁹³ A look at recent American textbooks for Western Civilization courses, the most typical manner in which students are first introduced to the Renaissance, reveals considerable divergence, particularly with respect to the endpoint (see table 1.1).

The differences are greater upon closer inspection. The Sherman and Salisbury textbook, for example, places the Renaissance between the years 1300 and 1640. But the timeline provided begins in 1320, when Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*, and ends in 1648, with the conclusion of the Thirty Years War.⁹⁴ The Hause and Maltby book uses two periodizations: one from 1350 to 1500 corresponding to political developments, and another from 1340 to 1520 corresponding to intellectual developments. The Kagan, Turner, and Ozment book uses the term Renaissance only for Italy.

Table 1.1 *The Renaissance in recent American Western Civilization textbooks*

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Publication date</i>	<i>Renaissance years</i>
Kagan, Turner, Ozment	<i>Western Heritage</i>	2004	1375–1527
Levack, Muir, et al.	<i>The West</i>	2004	1350–1550
Chambers, Hanawalt, et al.	<i>Western Experience</i>	2005	1300–1500
Coffin, Stacey, et al.	<i>Western Civilizations</i>	2005	1350–1550
Hause, Maltby	<i>Western Civilization</i>	2005	1340–1520
Greer, Lewis	<i>Western World</i>	2005	1300–1600
Sherman, Salisbury	<i>The West in the World</i>	2006	1300–1640
Spielvogel	<i>Western Civilization</i>	2006	1350–1550
McKay, Hill, Buckler et al.	<i>A History of Western Society</i>	2008	1350–1550
Hunt, Martin, Rosenwein et al.	<i>The Making of the West</i>	2005	1400–1500
Kishlansky, Geary et al.	<i>Civilization in the West</i>	2008	1350–1550

Sources: Kagan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004); Levack (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004); Chambers (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005); Coffin (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Hause (Belmont, CA:Wadsworth, 2005); Greer (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005); Sherman (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006); Spielvogel (Belmont, CA: Thomson, 2006); McKay (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Hunt (Boston: Bedford/St Martin, 2005); Kishlansky (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008).

Periodization has differed also according to the background of the author. American scholars have shown a tendency to start the Renaissance in the fourteenth century and end it in the sixteenth. Europeans frequently focus on later years, eliding the Renaissance with the so-called “long” sixteenth century, a term popularized by Braudel, going from roughly 1450 to 1620. In the English academy the year 1500 has long been considered a crossover point from the medieval world. French scholars have been inclined to follow general dates set out by Michelet, starting the Renaissance with the French invasion of Italy at the end of the fifteenth century.⁹⁵ Bernard Cottret’s recent study of the Renaissance begins in 1492 and ends in 1598 (the Edict of Nantes), with emphasis on the activities at the court of Francis I.⁹⁶

There is in short no real consensus. The distinction between the Renaissance and Reformation movements remains problematic, and for all the literature devoted to the subject, the point of separation with the Middle

Ages has hardly been established. Daniel Waley and Peter Denley's *Late Medieval Europe* deals with the period from 1250 to 1520, leaving little room for a Renaissance, at least by American standards.⁹⁷ The Italianist Anthony Molho called his study of marriage in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florence, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence*. But his colleague David Herlihy titled his book on the economy of thirteenth-century Pisa, *Pisa in the Early Renaissance*.

There is lack of consistency even in the work of the same scholars, who have shown a tendency to rethink the issue throughout their careers. In his first history of Renaissance Europe, published in 1971, J. R. Hale dealt with the years 1480–1520.⁹⁸ At the end of his career, in *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, Hale shifted the temporal limits of the period from 1450 to 1620, in essence the “long” sixteenth century. Even the umpire of Renaissance historiography, Wallace Ferguson, changed his mind. He advocated the years 1300–1600 in his “Suggestions for a Synthesis” (1951). But in his textbook, published a decade later (1962), he used the years 1300–1520. The terminal date corresponds to the deaths of Leonardo da Vinci (1519) and Raphael (1520) and the condemnation of Martin Luther (1521).

Some scholars divide the Renaissance into stages or generations. They use the rubrics “early, high, and late,” the same employed by medievalists for their period. The stages represent degrees of penetration and diffusion of the movement. Petrarch, an early figure, is emblematic of a “limited,” early Renaissance that involved few participants. Leonardo da Vinci (d. 1520) is representative of the “high” Renaissance, now a pervasive phenomenon, most evident in terms of artistic developments.

The motive forces and defining characteristics are, however, variable. Historians arrange their period markers according to differing criteria. Bouwsma linked his concept of Renaissance to psychological states. The early Renaissance represented a period of “hope”; the late Renaissance an era of “anxiety.”⁹⁹ Robert Lopez, in a spectacularly misguided metaphor, compared the three ages of the Renaissance to the life cycle of a “beautiful woman.” The early Renaissance corresponded to her youth, when she was filled with “confident expectation.”¹⁰⁰ The “high” Renaissance was a time of maturity, during which she fluctuated between “self assurance and disenchantment.” The “late” Renaissance represented old age and “despondency.”¹⁰¹

The temporal range has depended heavily on subfield. Intellectual historians often privilege events of the fourteenth century, art historians those of the fifteenth century. The current emphasis on “global” Renaissance willy nilly places stress on the sixteenth century, the era of the Atlantic voyages. Continuity is confused by subcategories that arbitrarily separate persons and events. In America, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) is introduced

to students as a product of the Age of Reconnaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) as a product of the Italian Renaissance, and Martin Luther (1483–1546) as the starting point of the Reformation. It is thus unknown to most students that the men were contemporaries.

The problems of definition and periodization are not likely to be solved, nor are the varied approaches and methodologies apt to be reconciled. For all its jagged edges, the true value of the Renaissance problem has been its ability to continue to provoke debate. As Paula Findlen has stated, the importance of the period lay in what it tells us about making and remaking the past, as a “testing ground for new approaches to history.”¹⁰² The debate has raised issues that have gone on to have scholarly lives of their own that have developed and evolved in interesting ways, in some cases into sub-disciplines. In this sense the current discourse has, in a basic way, returned to days of the émigré scholars of the postwar years of the twentieth century. It is the purpose of this volume to trace and evaluate these debates.

Notes

- 1 For Petrarch's priority see T. E. Mommsen, “Petrarch's Conception of the Dark Ages,” *Speculum* 17 (1942): 226–42.
- 2 E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York, 1956), p. 87.
- 3 Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations, oeuvres complètes*, vol. 7 (Paris, 1883–5), p. 167.
- 4 The French writer Seroux d'Agincourt is credited with being the first to use the term in the late eighteenth century. J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth Century Writing* (Oxford, 1994), p. 9.
- 5 Felix Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (Princeton, 1990); Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study of Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago, 2000).
- 6 Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT, 1983).
- 7 Burckhardt lamented that he had not yet sold 200 copies 18 months after the book appeared. See Denys Hay, ed., *The Renaissance Debate* (New York, 1965), p. 4 and Peter Gay's introduction to the S. G. C. Middlemore edition of Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York, 1982), pp. xviii–xix.
- 8 Specialization was encouraged by the growth at this time of scholarly journals throughout Europe and in America. Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA, 1948), p. 197.
- 9 Burckhardt was translated into Italian in 1876, English in 1878, and French in 1885.
- 10 J. R. Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance: The Growth of Interest in its History and Art* (London, 1954), pp. 84–107; Anthony Molho, “The Italian Renaissance,

- Made in the USA,” in *Imagined Histories, American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 264–7; Theodore E. Stebbins Jr, *The Lure of Italy: American Artists and the Italian Experience, 1760–1914* (Boston and New York, 1992).
- 11 Bullen, *Myth of the Renaissance*; Marcello Fantoni, “Renaissance Republics and Principalities on Anglo-American Historiography,” in *Gli anglo-americani a Firenze. Idea e costruzione del Rinascimento*, ed. by M. Fantoni (Rome, 2002), p. 37.
 - 12 Walter Pater, “The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry” in *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, 1974), pp. 20–1.
 - 13 Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance*, p. 7. See also the essays in John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen, eds., *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance* (Aldershot, 2005).
 - 14 Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 169–96; Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 204.
 - 15 John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 1, p. 22; Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 200.
 - 16 Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Leipzig, 1927). This was translated into English as *The Individual and the Cosmos*.
 - 17 E. P. Cheyney, *The Dawn of a New Era, 1250–1453* (New York, 1936), p. 2; Alfred von Martin, *The Sociology of the Renaissance* (New York, 1932).
 - 18 Bullen, *Myth of the Renaissance*, pp. 9, 90.
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