It was like this, so that
By the time he died he had only a rag
What's worse, as he died, sorely
The spur of love pricked into him
Sharper than the buckle-tongue
Of a baldric he could feel it
And this is what we marvel at
As he made his way out of this world.

Prince graceful as a merlin
Hear what he did as he left
He took a long swig of dead-black wine
As he made his way out of this world.

Masterpieces of the Renaissance

1005-1011

As with other terms that have currency in cultural history (for instance, *Romanticism*), the usefulness of the term *Renaissance* depends on its keeping a certain degree of elasticity. The literal meaning of the word—"rebirth"—suggests that one impulse toward the great intellectual and artistic achievements of the period came from the example of ancient culture, or even better, from a certain vision that the artists and intellectuals of the Renaissance possessed of the world of antiquity which was "reborn" through their work. Especially in the more mature phase of the Renaissance, men were aware of having brought about a vigorous renewal, which they openly associated with the cult of antiquity. The restoration of ancient canons was regarded as a glorious achievement to be set beside the thrilling discoveries of their own age. "Today," Rabelais writes through his Gargantua,

> the old sciences are revived, knowledge is systematized, discipline reestablished. The learned languages are restored: Greek, without which a man would be ashamed to consider himself educated; Hebrew, Chaldean, and Latin. Printing is now in use, an art so accurate and elegant that it betrays the divine inspiration of its discovery, which I have lived to witness. Alas! Conversely, I was not spared the horror of such diabolic works as gunpowder and artillery.

Machiavelli, whose infatuation with antiquity is as typical a trait as his better-advertised political realism, in the opening of his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* (1513–21) suggests that rulers should be as keen on the imitation of ancient "virtues" as are artists, lawyers, and the scientists: "The civil laws are nothing but decisions given by the ancient jurisconsults. . . . And what is the science of medicine, but the experience of ancient physicians, which their successors have taken for their guide?"

Elasticity should likewise be maintained in regard to the chronological span of the Renaissance as a "movement" extending through varying periods of years, and as including phases and traits of the epoch that is otherwise known as the Middle Ages (and vice versa). The peak of the Renaissance can be shown to have occurred at different times in different countries, the "movement" having had its inception in Italy, where its impact was at first most remarkable in the visual arts, while in England, for instance, it developed later and its main achievements were in literature, particularly the drama. The meaning of the term has also, in the course of time, widened

considerably: nowadays it conveys, to say the least, a general notion of artistic creativity, of extraordinary zest for life and knowledge, of sensory delight in opulence and magnificence, of spectacular individual achievement, thus extending far beyond the literal meaning of rebirth and the strict idea of a revival and imitation of antiquity.

Even, however, in its stricter sense, the term continues to have its function. The degree to which European intellectuals of the period possessed and were possessed by the writings of the ancient world is difficult for the average modern reader to realize. For these writers references to classical mythology, philosophy, and literature are not ornaments or affectations; along with references to the Scriptures they are part, and a major part, of their mental equipment and way of thinking. When Erasmus through his "Folly" speaks in a cluster of classical allusions, or when Machiavelli writes to a friend: "I will get up before daylight, prepare my birdlime, and go out with a bundle of cages on my back, so that I look like Geta when he came back from the harbor with the books of Amphitryo," the words have by no means the sound of erudite self-gratification which they might have nowadays; they are wholly natural, familiar, unassuming.

When we are overcome by sudden emotion, our first exclamations are likely to be in the language most familiar to us—our dialect, if we happen to have one. Montaigne relates of himself that when once his father unexpectedly fell back in his arms in a swoon, the first words he uttered under the emotion of that experience were in Latin. Similarly Benvenuto Cellini, the Italian sculptor, goldsmith, and autobiographer, talking to his patron and expressing admiration of a Greek statue, establishes with the ancient artist an immediate contact, a proud familiarity:

> I cried to the Duke: "My lord, this is a statue in Greek marble, and it is a miracle of beauty. . . . If your Excellency permits, I should like to restore it—head and arms and feet. . . . It is certainly not my business to patch up statues, that being the trade of botchers, who do it in all conscience villainously ill; yet the art displayed by this great master of antiquity cries out to me to help him."

The men who, starting at about the middle of the fourteenth century, gave new impulse to this emulation of the classics are often referred to as humanists. The word in that sense is related to what we call the humanities, and the humanities at that time were Latin and Greek. Every cultivated person wrote and spoke Latin, with the result that a Western community of intellectuals could exist, a spiritual "republic of letters" above individual nations. There was also a considerable amount of individual contact among humanists. In glancing at the biographies of the authors included in this section, the extensiveness of their travels may strike us as a remarkable or even surprising fact, considering the hardships and slowness of traveling during those centuries.

The archetype of the modern "man of letters" is often said to be Petrarch—the first author in this section—who anticipated certain ideals of the high Renaissance: a lofty conception of the literary art, a taste for the good life, a basic pacifism, and a strong sense of the memories and glories of antiquity.

In this last respect, what should be emphasized is the imaginative quality, the visionary impulse with which the men of letters of the period looked at those memories—the same vision and imagination with which they regarded such contemporary heroes as the great navigators and astronomers. The Renaissance view of the cultural monuments of antiquity was far from being that of the philologist and the antiquarian; indeed, familiarity was facilitated by the very lack of a scientific sense of history. We find the visionary and imaginative element not only in the creations of poets and dramatists (Shakespeare's Romans, to give an obvious example) but also in the works of political writers: as when Machiavelli describes himself entering, through his reading, the

> ancient courts of ancient men, where, being lovingly received, I feed on that food which alone is mine, and which I was born for; I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask the reasons for their actions, and they courteously answer me. For . . . hours I feel no boredom and forget every worry; I do not fear poverty, and death does not terrify me. I give myself completely over to the ancients.

Imitation of antiquity acquires, in Machiavelli and many others, a special quality; between mere "academic" imitation and the Renaissance approach there is as much difference as between the impulse to learn and the impulse to *be*.

The vision of an ancient age of glorious intellectual achievement which is "now" brought to life again, implies of course, however roughly, the idea of an intervening "middle" time, by comparison ignorant and dark. The hackneyed notion that the "light" of the Renaissance broke through a long "night" of the Middle Ages may be vastly inaccurate, yet it is inevitable to remember that this view was not devised by subsequent "enlightened" centuries but held by the men of the Renaissance themselves. In his genealogy of giants from Grangousier to Gargantua to Pantagruel, Rabelais conveniently represents the generations of modern learning with their varying degrees of enlightenment; this is what Gargantua writes to his son:

> My late father Grangousier, of blessed memory, made every effort that I might achieve mental, moral and technical excellence. . . . But you can realize that conditions were not as favorable to learning as they are to-day. Nor had I such gifted teachers as you. We were still in the dark ages; we still walked in the shadow of the dark clouds of ignorance; we suffered the calamitous consequences of the destruction of good literature by the Goths. Now, by God's grace, light and dignity have been restored to letters, and I have lived to see it.

Definitions of the Renaissance must also in one way or another include the idea that the period was characterized by preoccupation with this life rather than with the life beyond. The contrast of an ideal Medieval Man, whose mode of action is basically oriented toward the thought of the afterlife—and who therefore conceives of his days on earth as transient and preparatory—with an ideal Renaissance Man, possessing and cherishing earthly interests so concrete and self-sufficient that the very realization of the ephemeral

quality of life is to him nothing but an added spur to its immediate enjoyment—this is a useful contrast even though it represents an enormous oversimplification of the facts.

The same emphasis on the immediate and tangible is reflected in the earthly, amoral, and esthetic character of what we may call the Renaissance code of behavior. According to this "code," human action is judged not in terms of right and wrong, of good and evil (as it is judged when life is viewed as a moral "test," with reward or punishment in the afterlife), but in terms of its present concrete validity and effectiveness, of the delight it affords, of its memorability and its beauty. In that sense a good deal that is typical of the Renaissance, from architecture to poetry, from sculpture to rhetoric, may be related to a taste for the harmonious and the memorable, for the spectacular effect, for the successful striking of a pose. Individual human action, seeking as it were in itself its own reward, finds justification in its formal appropriateness; in its being a well-rounded achievement, perfect of its kind; in the zest and gusto with which it is, here and now, performed; and, finally, in its proving worthy of remaining as a testimony to the performer's power on earth.

A convenient way to illustrate this emphasis is to consider certain words especially expressive of the interests of the period—"virtue," "fame," "glory." "Virtue," particularly in its Italian form, *virtù*, is to be understood in a wide sense. As we may see even now in some relics of its older meanings, the word (from the Latin *vir*, "man") connotes active power—the intrinsic force and ability of a person or thing (the "virtue" of a law or of a medicine)—and hence, also, technical skill (the capacity of the "virtuoso"). The Machiavellian prince's "virtues," therefore, are not necessarily goodness, temperance, clemency, and the like; they are whatever forces and skills may help him in the efficient management and preservation of his princely powers. The idealistic, intangible part of the prince's success is consigned to such concepts as "fame" and "glory," but even in this case the dimension within which human action is considered is still an earthly one. These concepts connote the hero's success and reputation with his contemporaries, or look forward to splendid recognition from posterity, on earth.

In this sense (though completely pure examples of such an attitude are rare) the purpose of life is the unrestrained and self-sufficient practice of one's "virtue," the competent and delighted exercise of one's skill. At the same time, there is no reason to forget that such virtues and skills are God's gift to man. The world view of even some of the most clearly earthbound Renaissance men was hardly godless; Machiavelli, Cellini, Rabelais take for granted the presence of God in their own and in their heroes' lives:

> . . . we have before our eyes extraordinary and unexampled means prepared by God. The sea has been divided. A cloud has guided you on your way. The rock has given forth water. Manna has fallen. Everything has united to make you great. The rest is for you to do. God does not intend to do everything, lest he deprive us of our free will and the share of glory that belongs to us. (Machiavelli.)

> According to the Pythagorean system, Gargantua would, with his tutor, recapitulate briefly all that he had read, seen, learned, done, and assimilated in the course of the day. Then they prayed to God the Creator, doing Him worship and confirming their faith in Him, glorifying Him for His immense goodness, vouchsafing thanks for all the mighty past, and imploring His divine clemency for all the future. And so they retired to rest. (Rabelais.)

> I found that all the bronze my furnace contained had been exhausted in the head of this figure [of the statue of Perseus]. It was a miracle to observe that not one fragment remained in the orifice of the channel, and that nothing was wanting to the statue. In my great astonishment I seemed to see in this the hand of God arranging and controlling all. (Cellini.)

Yet there is no doubt that if we compare the attitudes of these authors with the view of the world and of the value of human action which emerges from the major literary work of the Middle Ages, the *Divine Comedy*, and with the manner in which human action is there seen within a grand extratemporal design, the presence of God in the Renaissance writers cited above cannot help appearing marginal and perfunctory.

In any attempt to discuss the religious temper of the Renaissance, we should not lose sight of certain basic historical facts: the Papacy was not only a spiritual power, but a political and military one as well; furthermore, the European Renaissance was a period of violent religious strife. The consequences of the Protestant Reformation (Lutheranism, Zwinglianism, Calvinism) were not only theological and ideological debates, but also armed conflict and bloodshed, as is apparent from the biographies of several of the writers presented here (Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne). It is also apparent that the position of the intellectual generally was not one of militant partisanship or, conversely, of retreat to an "ivory tower," but rather was characterized by wisdom and attempts at conciliation.

Much about the religious temper of the age is expressed in its art, particularly in Italian painting, where Renaissance Madonnas often make it difficult, as the saying goes, to recite a properly devout Hail Mary—serving as celebrations of earthly beauty rather than exhortations to contrite thoughts and mystical hope of salvation. Castiglione in the first pages of the *Courtier* pays homage to the memory of the late lord of Montefeltro, in whose palace at Urbino the book's personages hold their lofty debate on the idea of a perfect gentleman (an earlier Montefeltro appears in Dante's Hell, another in Dante's Purgatory); but Castiglione praises him only for his achievements as a man of arms and a promoter of the arts. There is no thought of either the salvation or the damnation of his soul (though the general tone of the work would seem to imply his salvation); he is exalted instead for military victories, and even more warmly, for having built a splendid palace—the tangible symbol of his earthly glory, for it is both the mark of political and social power and a work of art.

Thus the popular view which associates the idea of the Renaissance especially with the flourishing of the arts is correct. The leaders of the period saw in a work of art the clearest instance of beautiful, harmonious, and self-justified performance. To create such a work became the valuable occupation par excellence, the most satisfactory display of *virtù*. The Renaissance

view of antiquity exemplifies this attitude: the artists and intellectuals of the period not only drew on antiquity for certain practices and forms but also found there a recognition of the place of the arts among outstanding modes of human action. In this way, the concepts of "fame" and "glory" became particularly associated with the art of poetry because the Renaissance drew from antiquity the idea of the poet as celebrator of high deeds, the "dispenser of glory."

There is, then, an important part of the Renaissance mind which sees terrestrial life as positive fulfillment. This is especially clear where there is a close association between the practical and the intellectual, as in the exercise of political power, the act of scientific discovery, the creation of works of art. The Renaissance assumption is that there are things highly worth doing, within a strictly temporal pattern. By doing them, man proves his privileged position in Creation and therefore incidentally follows God's intent. The often cited phrase "the dignity of man" describes this positive, strongly affirmed awareness of the intellectual and physical "virtues" of the human being, and of his place in Creation.

It is important, however, to see this fact about the Renaissance in the light of another phenomenon: where there is a singularly high capacity for feeling the delight of earthly achievement, there is a possibility that its ultimate worth will also be questioned profoundly. What (the Renaissance mind usually seems to ask at some point) is the purpose of all this activity? What meaningful relation does it bear to any all-inclusive, cosmic pattern? The Renaissance coincided with, and perhaps to some extent occasioned, a loss of firm belief in the final unity and the final intelligibility of the universe, such belief as underlies, for example, the *Divine Comedy*, enabling Dante to say in Paradise:

> I saw within Its depth how It conceives
> all things in a single volume bound by Love,
> of which the universe is the scattered leaves;
> Substance, accident, and their relation
> so fused that all I say could do no more
> than yield a glimpse of that bright revelation.

Once the notion of this grand unity of design has lost its authority, certainty about the final value of human actions is no longer to be found. For some minds, indeed, the sense of void becomes so strong as to paralyze all aspiration to power or thirst for knowledge or delight in beauty; the resulting attitude we may call Renaissance melancholy, whether it be openly shown (as by some characters in Elizabethan drama) or provide an undercurrent of sadness, or incite to ironical forms of compromise, to some sort of wise adjustment (as in Erasmus or Montaigne.) The legend of Faust— "Doctor" Faustus—a great amasser of knowledge doomed to frustration by his perception of the vanity of science, for which he finds at one point desperate substitutes in pseudoscience and the devil's arts, is one illustration of this sense of vanity. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is another, a play in which the very word "thought" seems to acquire a troubled connotation: "the pale cast of thought," "thought and affliction, passion, hell itself." In these instances, the intellectual excitement of understanding, the zest and pride of achievement through what chiefly constitutes man's "dignity," his intellect, seem not so much lost as directly inverted.

Thus while on one, and perhaps the better-known, side of the picture man's intellect in Renaissance literature enthusiastically expatiates over the realms of knowledge and unveils the mysteries of the universe, on the other it is beset by puzzling doubts and a profound mistrust of its own powers. Man's moral nature is seen as only a little lower than the angels', but also scarcely above the beasts'. Earthly power—a favorite theme because Renaissance literature was so largely produced in the courts or with a vivid sense of courtly ideas—is the crown of human aspirations ("How sweet a thing it is to wear a crown, / Within whose circuit is Elysium") but it is also the death's head ("Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away").

Much of Renaissance literature takes its character and strength from the tensions generated by this simultaneous exaltation and pessimism about the human condition.

FURTHER READING

Richard L. DeMolen, ed., *The Meaning of Renaissance and Reformation* (1974), is a collection of essays by experts on the Renaissance and Reformation, with maps and illustrations. Paul Oskar Kristeller's lecture series on the Renaissance is now a paperback, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (1961). A solid, well-written general historical and cultural presentation is Eugene F. Rice, Jr.'s *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559* (1970), with illustrations, facsimiles, maps, bibliographic references. Lewis W. Spitz gives a reliable historical presentation of the period, taking into account literary and artistic trends in *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements* (1971).