The attempt to find an historical interpretation of the Renaissance, or of any other age, is predicated upon the acceptance of certain methodological assumptions. We must assume first the value of periodization and of synthesis, and the possibility of achieving both in a significant way. Few historians would now deny the value of periodization, though there are some who would still argue that the historian’s task consists simply in recounting events as they occurred. But, in fact, periodization is an intellectual tool, essential to the historian’s trade. Its use, to quote Collingwood’s dictum, “is a mark of advanced and mature historical thought, not afraid to interpret facts instead of merely ascertaining them.” 1 Whether his periods be decades, centuries, or larger chronological areas such as the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, the historian cannot think about history without them, much less interpret it for others. There is perhaps less agreement concerning the need for synthesis, particularly among scholars who are concerned primarily with one discipline or one aspect of history. Yet even for specialists, some general notion of the character of the age they deal with, and of the relation of their own field of interest to the total complex of its civilization, seems to me essential. Without some such general conception, the specialist may well find himself operating in an historical vacuum, in which the gravity of all objects seems equal.

A synthetic interpretation, which includes all aspects of a given civilization, is especially important for its bearing upon the problem of causation, even in the most restricted fields of enquiry. Painting, sculpture, music, poetry, science, philosophy, or theology may each develop to a certain extent along lines dictated by the discipline itself, either by a kind of inner logic, or as the result of the contribution of individual men of genius. Yet the general direction taken by any one of these can never, I believe, be fully understood or explained without consideration of other contemporaneous or antecedent changes in economic activity, political institutions, social configurations, and reli-

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gious beliefs, or in those more imponderable shifts in ways of thinking which we classify under the heading of climates of opinion, or which we designate, such being the poverty of the English language, as the Zeitgeist, or the Weltanschauung of the age. The interrelation of these various forms of historical activity may be difficult to establish with certainty; but the scholar who ignores the possibility of a causal relation between them and the subject of his own special interest, or who is content to recount what occurred without venturing to suggest why it may have occurred, is, I think, using the concept of scientific objectivity as a pretext for avoiding the necessity of thought.

But, if we admit the value of periodization and the desirability of synthesis, can these be applied satisfactorily to the concept of the Renaissance? In many disciplines, especially the history of art and music, the term Renaissance has been commonly used as a style concept, as distinguished, for example, from Late Gothic or Baroque. In other fields, notably the history of literature and the history of ideas, it has been used to designate a movement of thought, something which may influence, coincide with, or run counter to, such contemporaneous movements as the Reformation. Such uses of the term, if consciously defined, are justified within the framework of the particular discipline, and in both instances there is an implicit periodization, since certain chronological limits are assumed. For purposes of synthesis, however, the term Renaissance should, I think, be given a broader and more specifically periodic connotation, and be applied to the entire civilization of the age. It is as a period in the history of Western civilization, then, that I shall discuss it. Nor shall I pause here to justify the use of the term in this connotation, unfortunate though it is in many respects. I suspect it is here to stay. There is, in any case, little to be gained by re-enacting the miracle of the confusion of terms. The real problem is not what the age should be called, but what were its most characteristic traits and its chronological boundaries. How, in short, can we establish a periodic concept of the Renaissance that will prove a useful tool for the historian, and have practical value for the interpretation of history?

It would seem, at first glance, that the primary problem in periodization is to establish the chronological limits of the period in question. But that cannot be done without first forming some idea of what are the characteristics that distinguish it from the preceding and following ages. To serve the purpose of historical thought, a period must possess for the historian some conceptual content. It must correspond
to a significant stage in the development of a civilization or a part thereof. Otherwise it is merely an arbitrarily selected and meaningless section of time. But significant periods do not emerge of themselves out of the unbroken flow of historical activity as it occurred from day to day and from year to year. It is the task of the thoughtful historian to discern, by close study of the facts, noteworthy changes in the course of history; and this he cannot do without at the same time forming a concept of the nature of these changes. Having determined to his own satisfaction what are the fundamental characteristics of a particular stage in historical development, he may then determine more exactly the chronological limits of the period to which these characteristics apply. This process should not be regarded as the imposition upon historical reality of an arbitrary scheme, founded upon a priori reasoning. All that is meant is that in the interpretation of history, as in the study of the natural sciences, an hypothesis must arise out of observation, if the infinitude of isolated facts is to be arranged in some coherent pattern and so be made accessible to thought.

To return to the problem of the Renaissance, the first step in establishing a period that will have practical value for the historian must be to form, from the infinite variety of available fact, an hypothesis concerning its essential character. Divergence of opinion in this respect is, indeed, the principal cause of the bewildering diversity of opinion regarding the chronological scope of the Renaissance. When the Italian Renaissance first emerged, like Pallas Athene, full-grown from the head of Jacob Burckhardt, it possessed certain traits that were regarded as characteristic of Italian culture during the whole period from Dante to the Counter-Reformation. Of these traits, individualism was, in Burckhardt's synthesis, the determining factor. He regarded this as primarily the product of the unique social and political organization which had shaped the genius of the Italian people, but he also attributed it in secondary degree to the revival of the classics. The influence of the latter, he thought, was predominant in the most characteristic forms of Renaissance literature and art, and also gave rise to the pagan spirit that was commonly regarded as an essential element of Renaissance culture. The periodic concept of the Renaissance thus continued to be attached, more or less, as was the older and narrower conception of the renaissance des lettres, to the revival of antiquity. When northern scholars strove to establish a Renaissance period for their own countries, they found that equiva-
lent phenomena occurred much later than in Italy, and largely as importations. They thought of the Renaissance as having crossed the Alps at some time around the middle or end of the fifteenth century. The chronological beginnings of the Renaissance thus varied from country to country by a century or more. Still other scholars, reacting against the significance traditionally assigned to the revival of antiquity, thrust the beginnings of the Renaissance back to St. Francis, or continued the Middle Ages through to the Elizabethans. And some, particularly the historians of the natural sciences, regarding humanist culture with a bilious eye, looked before and after and pined for what was not, with the result that for them the Renaissance disappeared entirely, or became at best a kind of Middle Age, a regrettable lapse of time between two great periods of scientific thought.

Much of this chronological confusion arose, it seems to me, from constructing the concept of the Renaissance upon too narrow a foundation. If we take into consideration the total complex of European civilization, it will become evident, I think, that all the countries of Western Europe entered upon a period of decisive change about the beginning of the fourteenth century. The character as well as the rate of change varied from country to country, and from one type of culture, or institution, or form of activity, to another. But wherever we look, the typically medieval forms begin to disintegrate, while new and recognizably modern forms appear, if only in embryo. At the same time the centre of gravity shifts noticeably from the social and cultural factors that had been dominant in the Middle Ages to those minority phenomena that were to assume a leading rôle in the modern period. To define the Renaissance in a sentence seems rather like rushing in where not only angels but even fools would fear to tread. To avoid doing so at this point, however, would savor of moral cowardice. Viewing the Renaissance as an age in the history of Western Europe, then, I would define it as the age of transition from medieval to modern civilization, a period characterized primarily by the gradual shift from one fairly well co-ordinated and clearly defined type of civilization to another, yet, at the same time, possessing in its own right certain distinctive traits and a high degree of cultural vitality. And on the basis of this concept or hypothesis, I would set the arbitrary dates—1300 to 1600—as its chronological boundaries. To invest this definition with any significant content, however, and to pin down the weasel words, it is necessary, first of all, to indicate what may be considered the prevailing elements of both medieval and mod-
ern civilization, and then to trace the main lines of development within the transitional period.

In the broadest terms, then: the two dominant institutions of the Middle Ages were the feudal system and the universal church. Between them, they determined both the social structure and the ideological content of medieval civilization. And both, in their institutional aspects, were founded upon an agrarian, land-holding economy. Feudalism, indeed, took shape in the early Middle Ages very largely because it was the only possible means of maintaining social and political organization in a moneyless economy—an economy in which the land and its produce were almost the sole form of wealth—commerce, industry and normal city life having virtually disappeared. Lacking financial resources in fluid form, central government was unable to maintain effective political or judicial authority, and was forced to relinquish these into the hands of the great land-holders. Lay society was divided into two hereditary classes of widely divergent status: the land-holding nobility, whose duty it was to fight and govern; and the peasants, more or less servile, whose duty it was to work the land. Only one other class had a useful service to perform: the clergy, whose duty it was to pray and to care for the souls of men. Having no other means of support, the clergy necessarily became a land-holding class, and, as land-holders, the officers of the church became feudal lords. On the material side, then, the church was deeply involved in the feudal system. At the same time, the church had inherited from its origins in the Roman Empire a principle of universality and a centralized, hierarchical government, which it never lost. But this universal authority was of too large a sort to come into direct conflict with the highly localized government of the feudal nobles. Feudalism and the universal church, indeed, could live more or less harmoniously together as concordantia oppositorum.

Into this agrarian, feudal society the commercial revival of the eleventh and twelfth centuries introduced the new and alien elements of commerce and skilled industry, with the resulting growth of cities and the expansion of money economy. This was followed by a notable increase in the prosperity and the fluid wealth of the land-holding classes. It was also accompanied by a great quickening of cultural activity, by that full development of clerical and feudal culture that made the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the classic period of medieval civilization. The economic stimulus which spread from the growing cities, together with the heightened tempo of intercommuni-
cation along the lines of trade, was, I think, the material factor that made possible the immense cultural vitality of these two centuries. But the content and spirit of that culture did not emanate from the urban classes. Learning remained the exclusive monopoly of the clergy. Art and music served the church. And vernacular literature expressed the ideals of feudalism and chivalry. Exceptions to these broad statements will, of course, leap to mind immediately. It is my contention, merely, that the elements of medieval civilization which I have mentioned were the most general, and the most characteristic.

When we turn to the modern age, say by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the general complex of European civilization has changed so radically that it amounts to a change in kind rather than in degree. The economic balance has shifted from agriculture to commerce and industry. Money economy has become almost universal, and capitalism has replaced all but the vestigial remnants of medieval economic organization. On the political side, the national states with centralized government have taken the place of feudal particularism, while at the same time the unity of Christendom has been decisively broken. Beside the Catholic Church stand the Protestant churches and sects, in their infinite variety. The social balance has shifted, so that the urban classes are no longer a minor element in society, but are prepared to assume political and cultural leadership. The clerical monopoly of learning has been broken, and laymen have replaced the clergy as the most numerous and influential group, both as patrons and creators of the higher forms of culture. The secular elements in literature, learning, and general Weltanschauung now decisively outweigh the transcendental; and the natural sciences have replaced theology as the dominant form of knowledge.

Compared with the revolutionary changes in the character of Western European civilization between the years 1300 and 1600, the changes in the following three centuries are changes in degree rather than in kind. Despite the increasingly rapid tempo of development, the evolution of modern civilization has followed, or did follow at least until our generation, lines already clearly established by the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is my contention, then, that medieval and modern civilization, despite the common elements that have remained constant in the Western world for the past two thousand years or more, are, in effect, two different types of civilization, and that the change from the one to the other occurred during the three centuries of the Renaissance.
But, in thus asserting the transitional character of the Renaissance, I have done no more than lay the ground work for an interpretation of the age itself. The mere characterization of the types of civilization that preceded and followed it suggests the lines of change within the transitional age, but does nothing to indicate how or why the changes took place. Here we must face the fundamental problem of causation. What were the dynamic forces that disintegrated the medieval social structure, and as a result altered medieval ways of thinking, gradually at first, but in the long run so profoundly as to create a new type of culture? In thus framing the question, I am, of course, implying a partial answer to the problem of causation, for there is implied in the question the assumption that the fundamental causes of change in the forms of culture are to be found in antecedent changes in economic and political institutions and in the whole structure of society. This is an assumption that many scholars, notably those imbued with the traditions of Hegelian or Thomist idealism, would be loath to accept. Yet it seems to me that, if we regard the whole complex of European civilization in this period, social change everywhere precedes cultural change, and that what is new in Renaissance culture, including novel adaptations of inherited traditions, can most readily be explained as the product of a changed social milieu.

Let me repeat my earlier generalization—that medieval culture was predominantly feudal and ecclesiastical, the product of a society founded upon an agrarian, land-holding economy. By the beginning of the fourteenth century that society had already been replaced in Italy by an urban society, constructed upon an economic foundation of large-scale commerce and industry, and with rapidly developing capitalist institutions. In the northern countries the expansion of money economy worked more slowly, but by 1300 it was already disintegrating the land-holding basis of feudal society, and had at the same time made possible the effective exercise of central government in the great national or territorial states. Both politically and economically, the feudal nobles were losing ground to the rising forces of monarchy and the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile the church was also entering upon a period of profound crisis when, with its moral prestige sapped by a monetary fiscal policy, it was forced into a losing battle with the newly arisen political power of the national states. Though it survived as a universal church for about a century after the Council of Constance, it never recovered the prestige and authority lost during the period of the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism.
The changes in the social structure and in the balance of the social classes, which resulted from these economic and political developments, were not reflected immediately or in equal degree everywhere by changes in the forms of higher culture. But, with due allowance for a normal cultural lag, it seems to me that as the economic, political, and social balance shifted, the leadership in all forms of intellectual and aesthetic activity also shifted in the same directions: from the clergy to the laity, from the feudal classes to the urban, and from the isolation of monastic foundations and baronial castles to the concentrated society of cities and of royal or princely courts.

One of the ways in which the influence of economic and political change worked most directly upon Renaissance culture was through the spread of lay education and lay patronage of art, learning, and letters. And this, I think, was clearly the result of the massing of population in cities, of the growth of large private fortunes, and of the concentration of both fluid wealth and political power in the hands of kings and princes. Under the conditions of feudal life, the noble classes made no pretense to intellectual eminence or scholarship sublime, and as Professor Pollard once remarked, even today a little thinking goes a long way in rural England. Not only did ideas circulate more rapidly in an urban atmosphere, but capitalist enterprise necessitated a general literacy among the middle and upper classes of the cities, while at the same time it furnished the most prosperous of the urban patriciate with the means for liberal patronage. In similar fashion, the growth of centralized state governments, supported by taxation, opened up careers to laymen trained in law and administration, and also created new centers of lay patronage. The princely courts of Italy all became active centers of lay culture, and had also, incidentally, broken completely with the feudal traditions that had inspired the greater part of lay culture in the Middle Ages. The royal courts of the North, and semi-royal courts like that of the Dukes of Burgundy, retained the forms of a feudal and chivalrous society, but the literary reflections of these forms had by the fifteenth century lost the vitality that had inspired the feudal literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The forms of feudalism and chivalry no longer bore a close relation to social reality. Economic and political pressure combined to transform the semi-independent baron of the Middle Ages into the Renaissance courtier. The ranks of the nobility were being infiltrated by the *nouveau riche*, and beside the remnants of the
old noblesse d'Épée now stood the wealthy and highly cultured members of the noblesse de la robe. To maintain their position at court, scions of the old nobility were being forced to don a veneer of education and cultured taste, and to extend their intellectual interests beyond the spheres of courtly love and refined homicide which had been the principal themes of medieval feudal literature. The spread of lay education among the upper ranks of both the bourgeoisie and the nobility thus served not only to break the ecclesiastical monopoly of learning and the patronage of art, but also to modify radically the feudal and chivalrous spirit of vernacular literature. As higher education was adapted increasingly to the needs of a lay society, even the clergy were exposed more than ever before to secular learning, so that their contribution to Renaissance culture was in many instances indistinguishable from that of the educated layman.

The increasing laicization of education and of learning, literature, art and music was accompanied, almost inevitably, by an expansion of their secular content, and frequently by the introduction of a more secular tone. By this I do not mean to imply that the men of the Renaissance were, in general, less religious than those of the Middle Ages. There has been enough nonsense written about the pagan spirit of the Renaissance without my adding to it. On the other hand, it seems to me equally nonsensical to seize upon every evidence of religious feeling or belief in the Renaissance as proof that its culture was still basically medieval. Christianity was not a medieval invention. The Christian tradition certainly continued from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance—and beyond—but it did not continue unaltered, nor did it in the same degree dominate the culture of the age. In the first place, the greatly increased participation of laymen introduced into learning, literature and art whole areas of secular knowledge and subjects of general human interest which, if not wholly lacking in the Middle Ages, were yet inadequately represented. In the second place, the writer or artist, who worked for a predominantly lay audience or for lay patrons, had to meet the demands and satisfy the taste of men not trained in theology nor bound by clerical traditions. Even the religious art of the Renaissance gives frequent evidence of consideration for the taste of lay patrons. Finally, religion itself was in some degree laicized. This is evident, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in the growth of anti-clerical sentiment, and in revolts against the hierarchical authority of the church and the sacramental-sacerdotal aspects of medieval religion. The
Wycliffite and Hussite heresies are extreme cases. But even within the bounds of orthodoxy, such movements of popular mysticism as the *Devotio Moderna* in the Netherlands show a tendency toward the development of a peculiarly lay piety. The religious writing of the Christian humanists offers further examples of an increasingly independent participation of laymen in the shaping of religious thought. These men were deeply pious, but they had little in common with Thomas Aquinas or Innocent III. The Protestant Reformation itself was in part a revolt against the sacerdotal domination of religion. In proclaiming the priesthood of all believers, Luther placed the believing layman on an even footing with the cleric. The whole problem of the relation of the Reformation to both medieval and Renaissance culture is, however, too complex to be discussed here. For the present, I can do no more than assert the opinion that it can be fully understood only if it is considered in relation to the changes that had altered the whole structure of European society and the character of European culture since the beginning of the fourteenth century. In short, I think that the Reformation must be interpreted as one aspect of Renaissance civilization, rather than as something running counter to it.

The emphasis I have placed upon social and cultural change, upon the decline of medieval and the rise of modern elements, is in accordance with my conception of the Renaissance as a transitional age. But, as I defined it, the Renaissance was also an age which possessed, aside from the uneasy co-existence within it of medieval and modern characteristics, certain distinctive traits and a high degree of cultural vitality. Here I can do no more than suggest answers to a few of the innumerable questions posed by this latter aspect of the problem. In the first place, whence came the cultural vitality of the Renaissance? Having no time for any but the briefest and most dogmatic of statements, I would say that it was made possible by unprecedented wealth and by the participation of an unprecedented variety of social types. I would say, further, that it drew its positive inspiration from the intellectual excitement caused by the challenge of new conditions of life, of new potentialities in every field of culture, and, in general, of a sense of breaking new ground and of scanning ever-widening horizons. Within the civilization of the Renaissance there were, of course, innumerable cross-currents, inconsistencies, and apparent reactions. These, I think, were the natural results of the conflict, more intense in this age than in any other since the dawn of Christianity,
between inherited traditions and a changing society. The Renaissance was an age of moral, religious, intellectual and aesthetic crisis. This has been recognized often enough. What has not always been so clearly recognized in this connection is that it was also an age of acute crisis in economic, political and social life.

In the second place, was the Renaissance an age marked to a peculiar degree by the spirit of individualism? This is a difficult question to answer, for individualism is a perilously protean concept. It is also more than a little shop-worn, and it bears the marks of much careless handling. In any case, I find it difficult to think in terms of the spirit of the Renaissance, just as I find it impossible to envisage the Renaissance man. Such a complex and vital age must have had many spirits, good and bad, though probably few indifferent. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that there was in this transitional age a growing awareness of personality and a keener sense of individual autonomy than had been possible in the social and cultural conditions of the Middle Ages; and it may be that this trait was more strongly marked, more aggressive, in the Renaissance than in later ages, when the individual's right to self-determination was more easily taken for granted. To individualism, thus defined, many factors contributed, in addition to those mentioned by Burckhardt; for there were more changes in the heaven and earth of Renaissance men than were dreamed of in Burckhardt's philosophy—for example, the growth of a lay piety that stressed the individual man's direct communion with God, and, at the other end of the moral spectrum, the development of a capitalist spirit that stressed the individual man's direct communion with Mammon. With the dislocation of European society that accompanied the breaking up of medieval institutions, men were left more dependent than before upon their own personal qualities, while the increasing complexity of social organization opened up a wider choice of careers, and more varied opportunities for the development of personal tastes and interests.

Finally, what is the rôle in the Renaissance of the revival of antiquity? That I have left discussion of the classical revival to the last does not mean that I regard it as unimportant. Rather the reverse. But I do think that its causative force, great though it was, was of a secondary character; that, indeed, the enthusiasm with which classical literature and learning were seized upon was itself caused by antecedent changes in the social structure, which became effective first in Italy, and later in the North. That men should love the
classics, once exposed to them, has always seemed to classicists an
obvious fact needing no explanation. Yet I think that the intense,
almost excessive enthusiasm for classical culture, which was peculiar
to the Renaissance, can be explained only by the fact that it was per-
fectly designed to meet the needs of educated, urban laymen, of a
society that had ceased to be predominantly either feudal or ecclesi-
astical, yet had in its own immediate past nothing to draw upon for
inspiration but the feudal and ecclesiastical traditions of the Middle
Ages. I am not forgetting that the twelfth century also had its clerical
humanists, notably John of Salisbury, but their humanism was of
a different sort, and between them and Petrarch fell the shadow of
scholasticism. The humanism of the Renaissance was not a clerical
humanism, though there were clerical humanists—and it was cer-
tainly not feudal. It cut across the most characteristic of medieval
traditions. When the mania for antiquity had passed its peak, and
the writers of the sixteenth century were laying the foundations for
the modern national literatures, they wrote not only for one class but
for all cultured people.

Without minimizing the importance of the revival of antiquity,
it is also worth noting that, even where the classics exerted no direct
influence, as in music, the Renaissance broke new ground, and ex-
hibited enormous vitality. This was the age that witnessed the great-
est strides in the development of polyphony and the work of a long
line of brilliant composers, from Machaut to Palestrina. Here, as in
so many other aspects of Renaissance culture, the increasing partici-
pation of laymen, and the growth of lay patronage, was accompanied
by the development of new forms and by the introduction of a larger
proportion of secular content and tone. Music in the Renaissance
was a social art, and a fair mastery of its techniques was an essential
qualification for the successful courtier or indeed for any cultured
person. Any account of sixteenth century social life leaves the im-
pression that wherever two or three were gathered together they sang
four or five part polyphony. I make no apology for thus ending my
discussion of the Renaissance on a musical note. That any synthesis
should leave an adequate place for music is, indeed, a point that I
wish to emphasize; for it is one of the peculiarities of the traditional
schools of Kulturgeschichte that, while giving full consideration to all
the pictorial arts, they have scarcely afforded a passing word for
music, the most closely related of all the arts to the life of the people.
In conclusion, may I disclaim any pretension to having solved all the problems of the Renaissance. The interpretation I have suggested is no more than a frame-work, within which there is room for much variation in treating the individual aspects of Renaissance civilization. Yet I feel that to approach the problems presented by the history of intellectual and aesthetic disciplines, of morality and religion, as well as of economic, political and social institutions from the point of view I have suggested will lead to a clearer understanding of the relation of each of these to the others and to the main currents of historical development. There is implied in this point of view a theory of historical interpretation, but not historical determinism. I would maintain, for example, that the growth of a wealthy urban society might well be regarded as a necessary conditioning factor in the development of Quattrocento art, whereas I find it difficult to see how the development of the art of the Quattrocentro could have been a necessary conditioning factor in the growth of a wealthy urban society. Yet, I also see no reason to believe that such a society must necessarily have produced Donatello or Ghirlandajo. To say that things happened thus does not imply that they could not have happened otherwise. In seeking to discover the causes of cultural phenomena, the historian must often be content with permissive or partially effective causes. He may be able to assert with some confidence what made a specific development possible, or even what determined its general direction, and what were the boundaries beyond which it could not go. But within that frame-work, he must always leave room for the unpredictable activity of the human spirit. He may be able to explain why the achievements of Michelangelo or Machiavelli, of Josquin des Prés or Erasmus were possible and why they would have been impossible a hundred years earlier or later, but what in these men was peculiar and personal eludes him. Realization of the fact that he cannot hope to explain everything fully, that history is not an exact science, should not, however, cause the historian to lose confidence in his craft or cease his endeavor to understand what can be understood. The historian's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's the study of history for?

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