

# All Petrarch's Fault: The Idea of a Renaissance

*Alessandra Petrina*

“The Renaissance was a new beginning, a ‘turning point’”<sup>1</sup>. This is what Jo Tollebeek wrote in the opening section of a 2001 article in which he discussed the positions of Jules Michelet (1798-1874), Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), and Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) on the topic. Such a statement echoes what the three scholars affirmed in different stages of their respective works, and what has then been taken up by subsequent scholars: the idea of the Renaissance as a “passage au monde moderne”, to use Michelet’s words<sup>2</sup>, does not sound too far away from recent statements about the ‘swerve’: by hitting on this wonderful, if not completely accurate, translation for Lucretius’ word ‘clinamen’, Stephen Greenblatt forced us to look once more at the Renaissance as a sort of magical moment, a time

---

<sup>1</sup> Jo Tollebeek, “‘Renaissance’ and ‘Fossilization’: Michelet, Burckhardt, and Huizinga”, *Renaissance Studies*, 15:3 (2001), pp. 354-66: p. 354.

<sup>2</sup> Jules Michelet, *Cours au Collège de France*, ed. Paul Viallaneix, Paris, Gallimard, 1995, 2 vols, vol. I, p. 351.

of radical change<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the modern history of scholarship we find this yearning for a rebirth – occasionally applied to other periods, and to more specific cases: one can make a good argument for a twelfth-century Renaissance centring around the *école de Chartres*<sup>4</sup>, or an equally valid one for a twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance that finds quasi-contemporary parallels in the Irish Revival or the Harlem Renaissance<sup>5</sup>. The period between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century to which we most commonly apply the label of ‘Renaissance’, given its trans-European validity, poses more problems, and its definition as a turning point has repeatedly been questioned and challenged, with insistent voices proposing its substitution with the locution ‘early modern’: the debate on this choice of definition is still open, and the present contribution, in exploring these words and their use, may pose more questions than offer answers.

It is important, first of all, to understand the nature of the terms that are being used. ‘Renaissance’ is closely connected to ‘humanism’, a term that has its own history. Paul Oskar Kristeller reminds us that ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ have different origins<sup>6</sup>: ‘humanism’ is a late entry into our vocabulary, coined (as ‘Humanismus’) in 1808 by F. J. Niethammer, a German educator, “to express the emphasis on the Greek and Latin classics in secondary education, as against the rising demands for a more practical and more scientific training”<sup>7</sup>. Only towards the mid-nineteenth century, as shown in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was this word applied to the intellectual movement associated with the Renaissance. The stress on Greek and Latin classics is expressive of a nineteenth-century (and late-eighteenth-century) view of the European cultural heritage that bypasses the medieval legacy; to this attitude we owe the radical distinction between Middle Ages

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*, New York, Norton, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> R. N. Swanson, *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan Glen, *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance*, Edinburgh, Chambers, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Humanism”, in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 113-37.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1961, 2 vols, vol II, p. 9.

and Renaissance, and perhaps even our penchant for such expressions as 'Dark Ages', though this particular expression also has a different story, as shall be seen presently. Humanism, in this perspective, marks the ideological change inherent in the Renaissance. However, as we reassess the relation between the late Middle Ages and what follows, we are also forced to reinvestigate humanism and the range of values it may be associated with. In order to do so we should leave aside the proto-romantic 'Humanismus', and concentrate instead on the word 'humanist' and its etymology. 'Humanista' is a fifteenth-century Italian word (first attested in 1484, according to *OED*) created to denote a teacher or student of the *studia humanitatis*, those subjects that promote the knowledge of mankind and man's intellectual development; as such, the word had a professional connotation rather than indicating a vocation or an inclination, as of one who would choose the humanities as an actual or possible profession (an analogous example would be 'jurista'); it is not necessarily connected with the universities, since humanists were not only academics, but also chancellors and secretaries, lay clerics or officials belonging to religious orders<sup>8</sup>. This means that the idea of a close association of the Renaissance with *humanae litterae*, as opposed to *divinae*, is slightly anachronistic, as are the idealistic connotations of the term 'Humanismus'.

This short exploration into words and their etymology is revelatory of our intellectual attitude. Our use of terms, when marking geographical, historical and above all cultural boundaries, is strongly influenced by our ideological approach – witness, for instance, the use of the term 'Italia' in Dante Alighieri and in present-day journalism. Does the same happen with 'Renaissance'? The word exists in fourteenth-century French to indicate a rebirth; only in the eighteenth century does it acquire (still in France) the meaning we usually associate it with, and in the following century, with this same meaning, it migrates to England. In 1824 the first *Musée de la Renaissance* was inaugurated in the Louvre; it is now incorporated in the larger collection, and it has lost its original

---

<sup>8</sup> On the earliest uses of the word 'humanista', see Augusto Campana, "The Origin of the Word 'Humanist'", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 9 (1946), pp. 60-73.

name, as the Louvre proposes itself more and more as “musée universel”<sup>9</sup>. It is interesting to note that a new *Musée de la Renaissance* was re-inaugurated, more recently: though its creation was decided by André Malraux, then Minister of Culture, in 1962, the website of the Château d’Écouen, where it is hosted, tells us that “Lorsqu’il inaugure le musée de la Renaissance d’Écouen en 1977, le président de la République Valéry Giscard d’Estaing en fait un élément de sa politique culturelle. Il entend ainsi satisfaire la demande du public pour la culture et le développement culturel de la France”<sup>10</sup>. In this passage we are presented with a French Renaissance whose definition appears to be more useful for the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French nation than for the *ancien régime*. Something analogous, if less politically connoted, happens in Italy: if Giorgio Vasari proposed the term ‘rinascita’ in his *Vite* (1550) to indicate a cultural rebirth, in his case applied to the visual arts (the term will be used again in the 1940s and 1950s to denote a political renovation), the word ‘rinascimento’ is adopted only in the nineteenth century. In Italy, its use is the domain of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians and literary scholars, from Francesco de Sanctis to Elio Vittorini – with a salutary moment of doubt in the case of Antonio Gramsci, who writes (using an interesting water metaphor when describing the Renaissance):

pare giusta l’opinione che il Rinascimento è un movimento di grande portata, che si inizia dopo il Mille, di cui l’Umanesimo e il Rinascimento (in senso stretto) sono due momenti conclusivi, che hanno avuto in Italia la sede principale, mentre il processo storico più generale è europeo e non solo italiano.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.louvre.fr/missions-et-projets> (accessed on 9 June 2019).

<sup>10</sup> “As he inaugurated the Musée de la Renaissance in Écouen in 1977, the President of the Republic, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, made it into an element of his cultural policy. He also intended to satisfy the demand of the public for the culture and cultural development of France”. See <https://musee-rennaissance.fr/le-chateau/inauguration-du-musee-de-la-rennaissance> (accessed on 6 June 2019). Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> “I agree with the opinion that the Renaissance is a movement of great scope, beginning after the year 1000, within which Humanism and Renaissance *stricto sensu* are two concluding moments, with their main seat in Italy, while the more general historical process is European and not simply Italian”. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Quaderno 17 (IV), § (8),

In England, the early uses of the word 'Renaissance' are associated with Walter Pater, John Ruskin, or John Addington Symonds: this use tells us more about these nineteenth-century intellectuals than about the Italian sixteenth century, exactly as the term 'Humanismus' speaks to us very clearly of German idealism.

This analysis takes its origin from an examination of the English Renaissance; however, as the term emerges and acquires currency, most of the theoretical discussion around it does not belong to English scholarship, but rather (like the term itself) to France first, and then to Germany – countries in which the debate on historiography develops much earlier. We traditionally focus on the names evoked by Tollebeek – Huizinga and Burckhardt in particular – but less frequently do we set these names against their own cultural background. As we turn to the development of this concept in the British Isles, we find a certain amount of simplification, as shown by the definition of Renaissance offered by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

**Renaissance** (French: "Rebirth"), period in European civilization immediately following the Middle Ages and conventionally held to have been characterized by a surge of interest in Classical scholarship and values. The Renaissance also witnessed the discovery and exploration of new continents, the substitution of the Copernican for the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, the decline of the feudal system and the growth of commerce, and the invention or application of such potentially powerful innovations as paper, printing, the mariner's compass, and gunpowder. To the scholars and thinkers of the day, however, it was primarily a time of the revival of Classical learning and wisdom after a long period of cultural decline and stagnation.<sup>12</sup>

If we consider the various events listed here as determining factors, we realise that the problem with this definition is the extreme mobility of its time span: America was conventionally 'discovered' in 1492, while the first landing on the part of European navigators in Australia is dated 1606, and the Dutchman Abel Tasman

---

<https://quadernideldarcere.wordpress.com/2015/02/12/umanesimo-e-rinascimento-3> (accessed on 6 June 2019).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance> (accessed on 8 June 2019).

'discovered' Van Diemen's land, now Tasmania, in 1642; Nicolaus Copernicus published his theory on heliocentrism in 1543; Wikipedia tells us that "feudalism effectively ended by about 1500"<sup>13</sup>, while common sense tells us that commerce never ceased to grow; paper, printing, the mariner's compass and gunpowder were never European inventions, nor were they recently developed when they arrived to Europe.

The result is that 'Renaissance' is an extremely slippery signifier, as we can easily see if we consider the chronological difficulty: if the Renaissance was born with humanism in Italy in the fifteenth century (although there is scholarly agreement that the villain of my piece, Petrarch, might also be called proto-humanist), in England the situation is completely different, and we move at least a century on, creating incidentally a curious dichotomy between the term 'Tudor' and the term 'Elizabethan': the latter is perceived as fully belonging to the Renaissance, the former is understood as an earlier period. In his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (first published in German in 1860), Burckhardt set a span for his examination of the Italian Renaissance that went from the middle of the fourteenth century to the *sacco di Roma* in 1527. History and geography resoundingly clash.

The term indicates both a span of time and a moment. The span of time, we have seen, is hard to pin down; the moment is equally difficult to define. If we agree with the statement inserted at the beginning – the Renaissance was a new beginning, a turning point – then we are left with a chase for a turning point, a new beginning, that has a wonderfully desperate quality. It is possible that these perceptions may belong solely to nostalgia – a central concept in this analysis, and another term that did not exist before the late seventeenth century:

The Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer created the word in 1688, introducing it in his *Dissertatio Medica de Nostalgia, oder Heimweh* to describe a mental and physiological disease Swiss soldiers suffered in their military service; his dissertation also draws on civilian evidence and concludes that nostalgia could affect anyone [...]. Hofer joined the Greek 'nostos'

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feudalism> (accessed on 8 June 2019).

(to return home) and 'algos' (pain, or sorrow) to establish the word's connection to a longing to return 'home'.<sup>14</sup>

Nostalgia requires us to look back at a mythical past, or transpose this myth into a utopian future: the actual rebirth never happens as we speak, in the here and now. It is the exact equivalent of the German 'Heimweh' – a state of elsewhere. Seen in these terms, 'Renaissance' begins to sound dangerously like a great alibi. The narrative commonly associated with this moment of rebirth partakes of the mythical quality of nostalgia, as shown by Jacob Burckhardt's famous passage:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.<sup>15</sup>

Jason Scott-Warren comments thus:

What Burckhardt offers us in this hugely influential passage, first published in 1860, is a fairy story. The princess slept for more than a thousand years (the 'Middle Ages'), but eventually she woke up, shook her head free of childish dreams, and assumed her responsibilities. The veil melted away; illusions of communal identity gave way to the truth of individuality, 'spiritual' individuality of a lofty, noble, adult kind.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Kristine Johanson, "Never a Merry World: The Rhetoric of Nostalgia in Elizabethan England", in *Representations of Elizabeth I in Early Modern Culture*, eds Alessandra Petrina and Laura Tosi, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 210-27: pp. 210-11.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1890 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Jason Scott-Warren, *Early Modern English Literature*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005, p. 223.

Scott-Warren's rejoinder is timely, but it exposes another huge lexical problem: not the word 'Renaissance', but the locution 'Middle Ages'. In trying to establish a chronology and a sense to our idea of Renaissance, the stumbling block resides exactly with this unwieldy expression. Whether we are thinking of the Middle Ages in terms of the desiccated fossilization evoked by Michelet, or rather with a look at the "bizarre and overcharged forms" and the "worn-out imagination" of the decadent, quasi-Byzantine vision evoked by Johan Huizinga<sup>17</sup>, we are faced with a deeply unsatisfying description. We now repudiate definitions such as this:

The *Dark Ages* is a term applied in its widest sense to that period of intellectual depression in the history of Europe from the establishment of the barbarian supremacy in the fifth century to the revival of learning about the beginning of the fifteenth, thus nearly corresponding in extent with the Middle Ages.<sup>18</sup>

But perhaps we react to the wrong terms. As we eschew the *grand récit* of history as a continuous progress, we look askance at terms such as 'Dark Ages' (together with a host of terms that were in favour at different times over the past three centuries, from 'Barbarous Ages' to 'Leaden Ages', 'Obscure Ages', 'Monkish Ages', 'Muddy Ages' and 'Gothic Period')<sup>19</sup>. We are uncomfortable with the words 'barbarian' or 'depression'. But the real problem is the time span. The Middle Ages are an ungainly "millennium of middleness, a space that serves simply to hold apart the first beginning of antiquity and the Renaissance rebeginning"<sup>20</sup>; tentative divisions into high, middle and low simply underline the trouble we have with it. The temptation to subsume the whole millennium in a swamp of discontent is understandable, and medieval studies, with an objective limitation of documentary

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Tollebeek, p. 358.

<sup>18</sup> *The American Cyclopaedia*, 1883-1884, 16 vols, vol. I [1883], p. 186, quoted in Theodor E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'", *Speculum*, 17:2 (1942), pp. 226-42: p. 226.

<sup>19</sup> Fred C. Robinson, "Medieval, the Middle Ages", *Speculum*, 59:4 (1984), pp. 745-756: p. 749.

<sup>20</sup> Lee Patterson, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies", *Speculum*, 65 (1990), pp. 87-108: p. 92.

evidence, and with their insistence on codicology, philology, linguistic expertise and utter repudiation of the error, have cooperated in insulating the period in a cocoon of cold unknowability<sup>21</sup>. Yet, if we try approaching the period from its concluding centuries, the 'late' Middle Ages, we may make some interesting discoveries.

In the *American Cyclopaedia* definition quoted above, we react strongly to the term 'Dark Ages', even more than to its almost automatic identification with the Middle Ages. Yet, ultimately we owe this expression to one of the great writers of the Middle Ages, Petrarch. The expression 'Middle Ages' was actually used by medieval writers – from Augustine, who writes “in hoc interim saeculo”, to Julian of Toledo, who uses “tempus medium” – to refer to the time between the Incarnation and the Last Judgement<sup>22</sup>. In this sense, our own usage is simply a contraction, a reduction to historical terms of what transcends history. As shown as early as 1942 by Theodor Mommsen, 'Dark Ages' is not simply the battle cry of the moderns, of the Enlightenment, or even of the Renaissance. If the contrast between light and darkness is a staple of Christian allegory, we find it being used with reference to explicitly classical, pre-Christian culture in Petrarch. In his *Apologia contra cuiusdam anonymi Galli calumnias*, probably completed around 1370, Petrarch explicitly borrows the image with reference to the ancient Romans:

Nullo enim modo diuinarum illis uerum ueritas apparere illis poterat, quibus nondum uerus sol iustitiae illuxerat. Elucebant tamen inter errores ingenia, neque ideo minus uiuaces erant oculi quamuis tenebris et densa caligine circumsepti, ut eis non erranti odium, sed indignae sortis miseratio deberetur.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Thus Patterson in the concluding section, and *pars construens*, of his article.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, p. 749.

<sup>23</sup> “In no way could divine truth appear to them, since the true sunlight of justice had not yet illuminated them. Yet amidst the errors there shone forth men of genius, and no less keen were their eyes, although they were surrounded by darkness and dense gloom; therefore they ought not so much to be hated for their erring but pitied for their ill fate”. Petrarch, *Apologia contra cuiusdam anonymi Galli calumnias*, in *Opera omnia*, Basel, 1554, p. 1195, quoted in Mommsen, p. 227. My translation is an adaptation of Mommsen's.

Petrarch, as well as a poet, was a proto-humanist in the sense that he was participating in the first attempts at a rediscovery of the classical literary heritage – how great must have been his despair at realizing the loss of probably the greatest part of the ancient Greek and Latin texts, and the impossibility, in the absence of a systematic recovery of the classical Greek language, to approach the surviving texts in anything like equal terms. By looking back at Roman greatness Petrarch does not simply evince a sense of nostalgia, of *ubi sunt*: “To him those ruins evidently bore witness to the time when Rome and the Romans had been great”<sup>24</sup>.

What Petrarch draws from his contemplation of the ever-vanishing legacy of the past is a new sense of history: “Quid est enim aliud omnis historia quam Romana laus?”<sup>25</sup>. The Roman past can be a model for the future, rather than simply inspiring nostalgia for the past. Man builds his own future on what he remembers of the greatness of the past; to understand Petrarch’s perception of this idea we should look back once more at the origin of the word ‘humanist’. It is, so to speak, a pro-active word, indicating active engagement with contemporary society by means of one’s learning and rhetorical ability. Thus ‘humanist’ coincides with ‘intellectual’, but also with a word loved by late medieval English poets, ‘clerk’. Offering his reflections on this role, Petrarch tried to find a meaning for his own time not only in relation with the greatness of the Roman past, but also with the future. As we have seen, Mommsen used these reflections to contend that Petrarch invented ‘the Dark Ages’; I would rather suggest he offered new possibilities for the development of man, based on human and not divine history. In his reflections there is a sense of renewal, of rebirth of the past, that can be associated with what we read in some Chaucerian passages:

For out of olde felde, as men seyth,  
Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,

---

<sup>24</sup> Mommsen, p. 233. On this point see also Margaret Bridges, “Writing, Translating and Imagining Italy in the *Polychronicon*”, in *Anglo-Italian Cultural Relations in the Later Middle Ages*, eds Michele Campopiano and Helen Fulton, Woodbridge, York Medieval Press, 2018, pp. 8-39: p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> “What else, then, is all history, if not the praise of Rome?” Petrarch, *Apologia contra cuiusdam anonymi Galli calumnias*, in *Opera omnia*, Basel, 1554, p. 1187, quoted and translated in Mommsen, p. 237.

And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,  
Cometh al this newe science that men lere.<sup>26</sup>

What both the Petrarchan and the Chaucerian lines show is a detachment from the model proposed by Jerome in his *Commentaries* and Augustine in his *City of God*: the vernacular poets present a model of universality and continuity in history, within a fundamentally cyclical rhythm superimposed over the cyclical rhythm of nature<sup>27</sup>. Petrarch introduced a new demarcation in history, in which the concept of *declinatio imperii* has a historical valence that parallels and sometimes contradicts the universalizing vision of history centred upon the Incarnation. He proposes a human history in which the Renaissance can be envisaged as the work of man. His reflections on fame and the legacy of classical tradition prompted the inscription of poetry (his own, as well as his forebears' and contemporaries') within the wider structure of human history. This must be negotiated against the Augustinian legacy, in order to understand the evolution of this concept.

In the eleventh book of the *Confessions*, Augustine interrogates himself on the human perception of the past and future: both, he argues, exist in the present, in the here and now. This informs his view of history: the past belongs to human narration and human memory, while the future is in prophecy, premeditation, and in the images created by imagination. Human writing encompasses time. The various faculties of the human mind, in this perspective, exercise control on three modes of time which all exist in the present: in collective terms, if history and national consciousness belong to the 'past of the present', strategy and policy belong to the 'future of the present'<sup>28</sup>. While keeping faith to Augustine's view of time and history, Petrarch also strove to comprehend a development of culture that clamoured to be understood in its own terms, beyond the inescapable reference to the divine plan. The memorial function of history entailed also a never-ending struggle against time. In keeping with Petrarch's vision of himself as a *humanista*, we can inscribe his literary effort within what William

<sup>26</sup> *The Parliament of Fowls*, ll. 22-25. Quotations from Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>27</sup> On this point see Mommsen, p. 238.

<sup>28</sup> Aurelius Augustinus, *Confessiones*, ed. Giorgio Sgargi, Siena, Barbera, 2007, 11.18.23.

Kennedy calls “a shared sense of experience and application, calling and vocation, conveyed through an emergent sense of profession and a still unformed sense of professionalism”<sup>29</sup>. Thus he posited the continuum between the Dark Ages and the Renaissance, by living the former and posing the basis for the latter.

This also means that Petrarch created a feeling of expectation that made the emergence of the golden moment, the rebirth, the turning point, more and more desirable: he proposed an idea of Renaissance that, rather than a turning point, is a tension. In this view the term ‘Renaissance’ can contain a more articulate meaning: it expresses the long preparation, labour and pain of rebirth, rather than the mere point of arrival. As we look back at his legacy, as we recognize with some amazement the prophetic quality of works such as his *Epistula Posteritati* – in which prophecy is exploited to construct a sense of the role of poetry in history, and to offer indications on the active participation of the intellectual in the progress of history – we also tend to strive and identify that rebirth that he was so eagerly awaiting. A rebirth of which, of course, he was also an element. The problem becomes particularly clear when we think of a possible opposite to the term ‘Renaissance’: Petrarch of course would posit ‘Renaissance’ as the opposite of his own ‘Dark Ages’, but in so doing he contradicted Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction – by recognizing the possibility of a renaissance he negated the very darkness of his own age.

It may be posited that this is part of Petrarch’s legacy to English poetry. Something analogous to the considerations formulated above happens in the English fifteenth century, in which an insistence on the part of writers on their own dullness has generated a fundamental misreading on the part of modern scholarship, which recent studies have re-discussed; as David Lawton admirably shows, such “dullness” refers to

the favourite guise in which its poets present themselves: as “lewed”, “rude”, lacking in “cunnyng”, innocent of rhetoric and social savoir-faire, bankrupt in pocket or brain, too young or too old, feeble, foolish and fallen – in a word dull. This is a humility topos of an intensely

---

<sup>29</sup> William J. Kennedy, *Petrarchism at Work: Contextual Economics in the Age of Shakespeare*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 2016, p. 6.

specific kind. It owes much to Chaucer, but it is used to a very different end [...] to reclaim access to a public world.<sup>30</sup>

The dullness of the poet confronted with the legacy of the past becomes, in fact, a form of leverage to reclaim the role of writing, as shown by the most erudite of English poets, John Lydgate:

Shortnesse of lyff and foryetnesse,  
 The wit of man dul & ay slidyng,  
 Necligence and froward idilnesse, –  
 Echon stepmooder to science and konnyng,  
 That I dar sey[e]n, nadde be wrytyng  
 Onli ordeyned for our auauntages,  
 Ded wer memorie & mynde of passid ages.<sup>31</sup>

What is extraordinary is that these intellectual attitudes were being developed at the time in which intellectuals, from Petrarch to Lydgate, were reacting against a cultural status quo and setting in motion the very forces that would then condemn them as irretrievably retrograde. The very idea that these poets felt the desolation, darkness, dullness of their own times speaks of a teeming restlessness. The vision of scholars such as Michelet, wedded to an image of the Middle Ages as fundamentally dead, and therefore unable to be killed<sup>32</sup>, shows us the paradox of the Renaissance.

It is easy to see why, in these vastly changed times, we should react against the use of this word. We can find, I suspect, much more significance in our use of the term 'Renaissance' at different moments of our recent history than in the application of the term to a vague period between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century. The recent and rather peremptory re-acquisition of the term on the part of Greenblatt *et al.* should perhaps be read as a reaction to the feeling of desolate helplessness that gripped us all when we realised that Francis Fukuyama's triumphal end of

---

<sup>30</sup> David Lawton, "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century", *ELH*, 54:4 (Winter 1987), pp. 761-99: p. 762.

<sup>31</sup> John Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, London, Oxford University Press, 1924, IV.148-54.

<sup>32</sup> Tollebeek, p. 357.

history was not the climax of a dream, but the beginning of a nightmare<sup>33</sup>. In the same years in which Fukuyama was conceiving his anti-historicist utopia, the medievalist Lee Patterson was writing a salutary caveat:

As Paul de Man explained, whenever the cultural imperative of modernity was posited, as, for instance, in the Renaissance or in early-twentieth-century Modernism, it took the form of “a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure”. Nor was it simply the immediate past that had to be effaced; historicity itself came under attack. Modernity is the Demanian desire for “the unmediated, free act that knows no past”, what Jürgen Habermas calls “a longing for an undefiled, immaculate, and stable present”, the Heideggerean condition in which “the self, as a living presence, is in free possession of itself and its actions”. And so it must efface all those social determinants that reveal not merely the impossibility of originality but the illusoriness of “the unmediated, free act” per se.<sup>34</sup>

Fundamentally, the impulse is an anti-historicist one.

Equally fraught, in this perspective, is the locution that has come to replace, at least in part, the much-abused ‘Renaissance’: ‘early modern’. Less rewardingly beautiful than ‘Renaissance’, apparently more neutral, it is possibly equally problematic, if we consider the two terms that compose it one by one: if modernity is a moment of change, how can there be an *early* modernity? To borrow from two Italian poets, ‘Renaissance’ sounds as if one was saying, with Dante, “Democrito che il mondo a caso pone”<sup>35</sup>; ‘early modern’ resounds, with Leopardi, of “le magnifiche sorti e progressive”<sup>36</sup>, since ‘early modern’ implicitly equates ‘modern’ with ‘positive’ or ‘progressive’. Like ‘Renaissance’, the locution ‘early modern’ opens itself up to the charge of anti-historicity: modernity as a starting point negates the sense of history as change.

---

<sup>33</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Free Press, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> Patterson, p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> “Democritus, who ascribes the world to chance”. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, IV.136. Text and translation are taken from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey L. Bickersteth, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1981.

<sup>36</sup> “Our magnificent and progressive destiny”. Giacomo Leopardi, *La ginestra*, l. 51 (*Canti*, ed. Giulio Augusto Levi, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1928).

Inevitably, the counterpart of the definition of 'early modern' is a new coinage for the late Middle Ages, 'pre-modern'. Patterson falls prey to understandable irritation when he writes, with reference to these definitions:

That medieval texts do not figure in these discussions is precisely the point: the Middle Ages is not a subject for discussion but the rejected object, not a prehistory whose shape can be described but the history – historicity itself – that modernity must reject in order to be itself.<sup>37</sup>

If 'Renaissance' presupposes a turning point, 'early modern' presupposes a starting point, an event – of cultural, sociological or political import – that set things going. Both terms express a deeply felt human need, rather than describing a chronological sequence or a factual reality. Once again we turn to those events that may be said to have changed the course of Europe: we can focus on the printing press, praised by Luther with interestingly millenarian language as "God's highest and extremest act of grace [...] the last flame before the extinction of the world"<sup>38</sup>, on the Reformation, on the rise and establishment of the universities, on the rise of a middle class that becomes stronger and stronger in the cities as a reaction to the emptying of the countryside after the plague in the fourteenth century. None of these things 'started': they were found to be needed at that time, their combination was necessary and unique. We are still faced with the impossibility of linking any of these phenomena to one specific time, but we also begin to see patterns of analogy that allow us to identify a long turning movement, rather than a turning point. We find that the swerve, the idea of the turning point, creates a facile, attractive but perhaps banal narrative. So perhaps we should change our metaphors, use less mechanical and inorganic ones. The image I would like to use at this point is very far from the swerve, and it is borrowed from a novella Salman Rushdie wrote in 1990, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*:

---

<sup>37</sup> Patterson, p. 99.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 304.

He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity; and Iff explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. Different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe.<sup>39</sup>

This, I believe, is the flexible and organic model we should work on, and it suits also a different approach to the writers we are concerned with. We can see this constant crossing of currents in this (semi-random) collection of poetic fragments from different times, places, and languages, all focusing on the paradoxical feeling of love:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
Th' assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,  
The dredful joye alwey that slit so yerne:  
Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge  
Astonyeth with his wonderful werkyng  
So sore, iwis, that whan I on hym thynke  
Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke.<sup>40</sup>

For thee, against myself, I'll vow debate;  
For I must ne'er love him whom thou dost hate.<sup>41</sup>

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.  
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.<sup>42</sup>

If no love is, O God, what fele I so?  
And if love is, what thing and which is he?  
If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?  
If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,

<sup>39</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, London, Granta, 1990, pp. 71-72.

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parliament of Fowls*, ll. 1-7.

<sup>41</sup> William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 89*, ll. 13-14 (*The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> "I hate and I love. Why do I do it, you might ask? I don't know, but I feel it happening, and I'm burning". Catullus, *Poem 85 (Catullus: The Shorter Poems)*, ed. and trans. John Godwin, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1999).

When every torment and adversite  
That cometh of hym may to me savory thinke,  
For ay thirst I, the more that ich it drynke.<sup>43</sup>

My spirites / laboured bisily  
To peynte contenance / cheere and look  
For that men speke of me / so wondryngly;  
And for the verray shame / and fere I qwook.  
Thogh myn herte had be / dippid in the brook  
It weet and moist ynow was / of my swoot,  
Which was now frosty cold / now fyry hoot.<sup>44</sup>

E tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno.<sup>45</sup>

The examples are of course not completely random, as they tend to underline the continuity between the 'waning of the Middle Ages' and the 'flourishing of the Renaissance' in England – an autumn and a spring which seem to have known very little winter in between. Such continuity can also be identified in more theoretical terms. A wonderful case in this sense has been made by Helen Cooper in her inaugural lecture, *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, delivered upon the occasion of her becoming Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge in 2005:

It is worrying enough that we can so easily practise the doublethink that at once condemns the Middle Ages for their lack of technological advance even while we marvel at the great cathedrals; but at least cathedrals are visibly medieval, whereas that other great technological wonder, the mechanical clock, is just too familiar to see at all, though its invention in the fourteenth century had colossal implications for the secularisation and commodification of time – for our modern understanding of time, in fact.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, I.400-6.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, *Complaint*, ll. 148-54 (*Thomas Hoccleve's Complaint and Dialogue*, ed. John A. Burrow, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> "And I shiver in midsummer, burning in winter". Francesco Petrarca, *Sonetto 132* (*Canzoniere*, eds Paola Vecchi Galli and Stefano Cremonini, Milano, Rizzoli, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Cambridge, 29 April 2005*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 6.

Cooper mentions a number of other instances, from common law to the universities, from parliamentary democracy to the alphabetical index, to the European vernaculars, before moving to more strictly literary matters. Her point is that much of the wonder of the Renaissance is based upon the medieval foundational thinking, a slow and powerful elaboration that has indeed caused a radical reversal in European cultural approaches to reality, politics, time, education, writing.

When René Descartes formulated his “*cogito, ergo sum*”, his friends were quick to point out that he was eleven centuries late: the sense of subjecthood had already been formulated by Augustine<sup>47</sup>. This has also literary implications: as we turn to the inner life, Neil Corcoran reminds us that

[t]he word *soliloquium* was first used by Augustine in his *Liber Soliloquiorum* (*Book of Soliloquies*) in the fourth century AD, which was freely translated into Old English under Alfred in the ninth century. In Augustine, however, the word means not ‘speaking alone’, but entering into a particular kind of dialogue – between the soul and God, for instance, or between different faculties of the mind itself, such as the reason and will.<sup>48</sup>

This article was born of a talk given during a celebration of the journal *Memoria di Shakespeare*. When *Memoria di Shakespeare* took a new lease of life, in 2014, the first volume of the new series was introduced by an editorial, by Rosy Colombo and Nadia Fusini, re-proposing questions that we have been struggling with for quite a few decades. Provocatively, Fusini opened the issue with a question to be asked to “our friends, philosophers by profession”:

“Is or is not Shakespeare the potent force that has made our world the way it is?” – something of which Harold Bloom assures us when he states that “Shakespeare invented us”. Or, more sympathetically: “How deeply Shakespearean do you feel you are, or think you are? Is Shakespeare an ally of yours in your thinking?”. In other words, we ask

---

<sup>47</sup> Cooper, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Reading Shakespeare's Soliloquies: Text, Theatre, Film*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 57.

our philosopher friends if, in order to think, they *must* go to Shakespeare. Or whether they *can* think without Shakespeare.<sup>49</sup>

Bloom's point was meant to reassure us rather than Shakespeare. But scholars have the duty of eschewing facile answers and, perhaps even more so, facile questions. In terms of the philosophy of the individual, it may be argued that Boethius, whether via Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* or simply in and of himself, exercised a greater influence on Shakespeare than did Thomas More. The struggle of identity and desire, formalised by Augustine in his proposed dichotomy between *cupiditas* and *caritas*, may be linked back to Sappho or Catullus – only, in the case of some classical poets our sources are scarce and limited to lyrical fragments, without the systematic philosophical discussion that we find in the Middle Ages, and without the corollary offered by the huge courtly tradition. In our exploration of the invention of the self in Western thought we have a watershed: the sacrament of confession, discussed in the New Testament but formalised as early as the fifth century, with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 establishing that every Christian should confess at least once a year. One can see the offshoots of this practice in texts as diverse as Augustine's *Confessions*, Petrarch's *Secretum*, *The Book of Margery Kempe* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. So, in terms of Shakespeare in his own time, the question is simplistic.

However, Harold Bloom's question puts emphasis on the reading subject, that is, on us reading Shakespeare, not on Shakespeare as the object of reading. As Scott-Warren has perceptively written, "this narrative is suspect because it places 'us' [...] in the position of history's heroes"<sup>50</sup>. We need reassurance; we need to find our new centre: a position that is curiously Ptolemaic. It is as if the Copernican revolution required us to find a new centre no longer in the universe, but in ourselves, as Luigi Pirandello shows us in his *Il fu Mattia Pascal*:

---

<sup>49</sup> Nadia Fusini, "Myriad-minded Shakespeare", in *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies*, 1 (2014), pp. 7-20: pp. 7-8. The quotation is taken from Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, London, Fourth Estate, 1999, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>50</sup> Scott-Warren, p. 225.

*Maledetto sia Copernico!*

– Oh oh oh, che c'entra Copernico! – esclama don Eligio [...]

– C'entra, don Eligio. Perché, quando la Terra non girava...

– E dàlli! Ma se ha sempre girato!

– Non è vero. L'uomo non lo sapeva, e dunque era come se non girasse. Per tanti, anche adesso non gira. L'ho detto l'altro giorno a un vecchio contadino, e sapete come m'ha risposto? ch'era una buona scusa per gli ubriachi. Del resto, anche voi scusate, non potete mettere in dubbio che Giosuè fermò il Sole. Ma lasciamo star questo. Io dico che quando la Terra non girava, e l'uomo, vestito da greco o da romano, vi faceva così bella figura e così altamente sentiva di sé e tanto si compiaceva della propria dignità, credo bene che potesse riuscire accetta una narrazione minuta e piena d'oziosi particolari. Si legge o non si legge in Quintiliano, come voi m'avete insegnato, che la storia doveva essere fatta per raccontare e non per provare?<sup>51</sup>

Medieval texts like *The Peterborough Chronicle* could testify to the exactness of Pirandello's intuition: if man is already assured of his place at the centre of the universe, then he will simply want to tell his story, not to use it as proof. Our twenty-first-century search for a Renaissance exposes a very twenty-first century need for the justification of our own existence.

---

<sup>51</sup> "A curse on Copernicus! 'Now, now', Don Eligio exclaims [...] 'what has Copernicus got to do with it?' 'More than you realize; for, in the days before the earth began to go round the sun...' 'There you go again! It always did go round the sun!' 'Not at all. No one knew it did; so, to all intents and purposes, it might as well have been sitting still. Plenty of people don't admit it even now. I mentioned it to an old peasant the other day, and do you know what he said? "That's a good excuse when you're drunk!" Even you dare not doubt that Joshua stopped the sun. But that's neither here nor there. I was saying that when the Earth stood still, and man, dressed as a Greek or Roman, had a reason for thinking himself the most important thing in all creation, there was some justification for writing a detailed and rambling narrative. Doesn't Quintilian say, as you taught me, that history is made for telling, and not for proof?"' Luigi Pirandello, *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, in *Tutti i romanzi*, ed. Giovanni Macchia, Milano, Mondadori, 1973, 2 vols, vol. I, p. 322.