# Introduction

THE TITLE of the present work requires a certain amount of explanation. As the Middle Ages and the Renaissance come to be better known, the traditional antithesis between them grows less marked. The medieval period appears "less dark and static," and the Renaissance "less bright and less sudden." [1] Above all, it is now recognized that pagan antiquity, far from experiencing a "rebirth" in fifteenth-century Italy, had remained alive within the culture and art of the Middle Ages. Even the gods were not *restored* to life, for they had never disappeared from the memory or imagination of man.

Many works published in recent years have studied the underlying causes and the means of this survival.[2] We aim to resume this investigation here, developing it along new lines and taking it still further, not merely to the dawn of the Renaissance but to its very decline. We have not focused our attention upon those centers of medieval humanism where the reading of classical texts and the study of traces of pagan art kept the memory of the ancient gods alive in the minds of scholars and the imagination of artists; Jean Adhémar has made a contribution of the greatest interest on this aspect of the question, limited to France.[3] We view the problem from a different angle, and

[1] Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), Pref., p. vii.

[2] We name here only the most important: F. von Bezold, *Das Fortleben der antiken Götter im mittelalterlichen Humanismus* (Bonn-Leipzig, 1922); H. Liebeschütz, *Fulgentius metaforalis, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der antiken Mythologie im Mittelalter*, Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, IV (Leipzig, 1926); A. Frey-Sallmann, *Aus dem Nachleben antiker Göttergestalten* (Leipzig, 1931); also the article by E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, which is of fundamental importance: "Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art," *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, IV (1932–1933), pp. 228–280; and E. Panofsky's article, "Renaissance and Renascences," *The Kenyon Review*, VI (1944), pp. 201–236.

[3] *Influences antiques dans l'art du Moyen-Age français*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, VII (London, 1939).

attempt to show that the gods lived on in the Middle Ages in concepts which had already taken shape at the end of the pagan epoch—interpretations proposed by the ancients themselves to explain the origin and nature of their divinities.

"It is by no means easy," observes Fontenelle in *L'Histoire des oracles*, "to know how the pagan peoples looked upon their own religion." In fact, they found themselves in a dilemma from the moment they first began to reason about their beliefs; for "the myth really possesses its full significance only in those epochs when man still believes himself to be living in a divine world, with no distinct notion of natural laws; but long before the end of paganism, this first naïveté had disappeared." [4] Indeed, the effort of modern mythographers, since early in the nineteenth century, has been to recover the primitive mentality by way of philology and anthropology, and to recapture the intuitions of the earliest periods.

The ancients, however, in their inability to "investigate the origins of their own culture, to learn how their legends were formed and what may have been their earliest meaning," [5] evolved contradictory theories in order to render them intelligible—theories which are brought face to face, for example, in Cicero's *De natura deorum.* In essence, these may be reduced to three: (*1*) the myths are a more or less distorted account of historical facts, in which the characters are mere men who have been raised to the rank of the immortals; or (*2*) they express the union or conflict of the elementary powers which constitute the universe, the gods then being cosmic symbols; or (*3*) they are merely the expression in fable of moral and philosophical ideas, in which case the gods are allegories.

Now it was thanks to these interpretations, which were proposed by the ancients themselves and which integrate mythology in turn with world history, natural science, and morals, that the gods were to survive through the Middle Ages, preserved alike from oblivion and from the attacks of their enemies. But, as we have said, we plan to follow the fortunes of the gods well beyond the Middle Ages, up to the end of the sixteenth century. This will give us an opportunity to show how greatly the art and thought of the Renaissance

[4] E. Renan, *Etudes d'histoire religieuse*, chap. i, "Les Religions de l'antiquité," pp. 25–26.

[5] G. Boissier, *La Fin du paganisme*, II, p. 372.

were indebted to that particular tradition whose astonishing persistence and unsuspected prolongations we hope to reveal.

This *traditional* aspect of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century mythology is, in fact, less striking and less well known than any other. If one attempts to recall, for example, the profane themes most often treated in Italy at this time,[6] what come first to mind are the scenes of seduction or rape, of love or drunken revelry—and admittedly no parallel to these had been seen since the end of the ancient world. The kingdom of Aphrodite and Bacchus, peopled by nymphs and satyrs, with the Antiope of Correggio and the Ariadne of Titian as its reigning princesses, is in truth a new universe, rediscovered after the lapse of centuries; while the predilection of artists and men of letters for voluptuous themes bears witness to the spiritual revolution which has taken place. Once again poets dare to sing of

> . . . *l'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune*

and to glorify Desire as master of gods and of men.

But alongside or above this mythical realm within which nature and the flesh have come into their own again, there exists another realm, less familiar if no less seductive, where reign the great planetary deities, the heroes, and the allegories. It is above all in monumental art that figures of this type are met with—in palace vaulting, in chapel cupolas—and their role should not be mistaken for a purely decorative one. Actually their true meaning and character may be understood only by establishing their connection with their immediate forerunners, the gods of the Middle Ages, who had survived as the incarnation of ideas. In some cases the relationship is obvious: we easily recognize in the combat of Diana and Pallas with Venus and her train, which in Mantegna's painting represents the triumph of Wisdom over Vice, one of the spiritual dramas (*psychomachiae*) dear to the preceding age. At the same time, however, the meaning of other mythological compositions, such as

[6] These themes have been enumerated by S. Reinach, "Essai sur la mythologie figurée et l'histoire profane dans la peinture italienne de la Renaissance" (works prior to 1580, with Index), *Rev. archéol.*, ser. v, vol I (1915), pp. 94–171. The list has been completed by R. C. Witt, "Notes complémentaires sur la mythologie figurée et l'histoire profane dans la peinture italienne de la Renaissance," *ibid.*, ser. v, vol. IX (1919), pp. 173–178. Cf. also L. Roblot-Delondre, "Les sujets antiques dans la tapisserie," *ibid.* (1917), pp. 296 ff.; *ibid.* (1918), pp. 131 ff.; *ibid.* (1919), pp. 48 ff., 294 ff.; the first section of this list deals with "La mythologie, les cycles légendaires, et les Triomphes des dieux," with Index.

those of Francesco Cossa in the Schifanoia Palace at Ferrara or of Baldassare Peruzzi on the ceiling of the Farnesina, becomes clear only if we see them as the outcome of the medieval astrological tradition; even the *Parnassus* of Raphael in the Stanza della Segnatura forms part of a spiritual edifice, the structural elements of which are still largely scholastic.

It is difficult, it must be confessed, to trace the frontiers separating these two great profane cycles (the second of which alone concerns us here), for one melts insensibly into the other. Even the games and dances, the idyls and the Bacchic triumphs, whose sole object is apparently to delight the senses and transport the imagination, often embody some meaning or *arrière-pensée* —are intended, in short, as food for the mind. It is only our indifference to the subject,[7] or our ignorance, which has kept us from examining or identifying it. Patient analysis would in some cases reveal the secret of the work; and at the same time we should recognize, in the classical motif thus "resurrected," the transposition of a medieval theme.

The difference in styles acts as a further hindrance to our awareness of this continuity of tradition, for Italian art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries invests the ancient symbols with fresh beauty; but the debt of the Renaissance to the Middle Ages is set forth in the texts. We shall attempt to show how the mythological heritage of antiquity was handed down from century to century, through what vicissitudes it passed, and the extent to which, toward the close of the Cinquecento, the great Italian treatises on the gods which were to nourish the humanism and art of all Europe were still indebted to medieval compilations and steeped in the influence of the Middle Ages.

When conceived of in these terms, our subject, already vast and complex in itself, forces us to cover an immense period of time. We have accepted this challenge, with its inevitable risks. Frequently we have had to limit ourselves to a cursory sketch, but in such cases we have tried to indicate the main outlines without altering the proportions. For the sake of precision, we have at some points restricted our inquiry to some series of special importance, like that of the planetary figures, whose history has served us as an example of certain phenomena of survival and evolution.

[7] See for example a characteristic comment made by Taine on a Veronese painting: "It is an allegory, but the subject hardly concerns us" (*Voyage en Italie* [1866], II, p. 433).

The essential function of the visual image, which plays so important a part in this book, is the summing up of trends or currents of thought. Our examples have been chosen and analyzed—at least for the most part—not from the formal or stylistic point of view, but rather as documents and witnesses. In many cases their mere succession furnishes us with a guiding thread; elsewhere they supplement or complement the texts. They allow us to recognize or to establish the continuity of a tradition and to trace the directions in which it extends. In a word, iconography serves as a constant auxiliary to the study of the history of ideas.

Finally, we have throughout subordinated our ambition to be comprehensive to our regard for clarity. To pioneer in a region which is still scarcely known because it is the meeting place of several disciplines and so belongs specifically to none, to plant signposts there and open up vistas which may help to orient other travelers—this is the end to which our efforts have been directed.