With the coming of the Renaissance a new, more secular, and in some respects more optimistic conception of history began to emerge. First in Italy and then in northwestern Europe, the world lost some of its terror, and mythology released its grip on the understanding of the past. Petrarch was perhaps the first author clearly recognizing the decline of the Roman Empire as a purely historical phenomenon. Although still looking upon his own age as the nadir of all times, he occasionally expressed some confidence that arts and sciences would revive and his country regain its former strength.1 And among Petrarch’s admirers in the Quattrocento, somber feelings about the corruption of Italy made place for a sense of pride in the recent achievements of Italian artists and scholars. Perhaps nothing else divides so sharply the Renaissance from the Middle Ages as this new awareness of living in an era superior to the preceding period.2

At this time the ancient doctrine of the eternity of the world – already adopted by some medieval admirers of Aristotle – gained increased prestige among European intellectuals. Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, and Lucilio Vanini ignored, if they did not openly criticize, the Christian expectation of the end of the world and reintroduced the ancient concept of endless flux or cyclical movement.

1 W. Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the Dark Ages,” Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 107–209; J. H. Robinson and H. W. Rolfe, Petrarch, the First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters (New York, 1909), 208–213. The humanists of the Quattrocento designated historical decline as “inclinatio,” a term which they derived from the classical “inclinare” (a term used by Cicero and Sallust in reference to the alleged corruption of the Roman Republic); see Mazzarino, op. cit., 26, 72–75. Vernacular derivatives of this Latin term (Italian: “inclinazione”; French: “inclinaison”) were current in the sixteenth century but fell into disuse in the subsequent century.

Among the later humanists the common belief in the Golden Age in the past found its first modern critics. Some of them even dreamed about a Golden Age in the near future or proclaimed the superiority of the "moderns" over the "ancestors."  

But the gradual replacement of Christian supernaturalism by a naturalist and secular outlook did not necessarily lead to a more cheerful view of history. On the contrary, once again, as in antiquity, the course of events often appeared as deprived of any ultimate meaning. Thus one of the most naturalist minds of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, was obsessed with visions of a catastrophic end of the world, an event that he no longer envisaged as a divine judgment consoling to the faithful, but as a disaster in which all men, regardless of their merits, would suffer the same torments.  

Most humanists, moreover, remained painfully aware of the superiority of classical civilization and, like the venerated ancients, placed the Golden Age in the past instead of the future. To them the idea of a "Renaissance" represented a longing for renewal rather than a proud awareness of actual accomplishments. And in many instances their high hopes for a better future were followed by bitter disillusionment. Thus Marsilio Ficino and Erasmus ended their lives without any of the youthful optimism with which they had once viewed the trend of their times. The wide response to Savonarola's virulent denunciations of Renaissance society also indicates that many Italians of the end of the fifteenth century still looked upon their age as a period of crisis and corruption. In other words the exuberant optimism of the Renaissance is little more than a myth. 

II

One of the new secular ideals that increased in strength during the Renaissance was that of nationalism. Many Italian, German, French,