

Introduction

I

Among our various versions of the unfolding history of Western culture since Plato, one of the ideas that still looms large is the idea of the Renaissance: the idea that, somewhere in Europe at some time between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, there took place a certain definitive rupture that parted Western cultural history into two, leaving earlier centuries on the side of the “ancient” and later ones on the side of the “modern.” According to this idea of the Renaissance, the definitive rupture was not so much a *re-naissance* as a *naissance* pure and simple. What really matters about the Renaissance, for proponents of this idea, is not what seems to have mattered for the first “Renaissance men” such as Petrarch: the re-birth of philological interest in classical Roman and Greek literature; rather, it is the *unprecedented birth* of the concept and possibility of the individual, subjective self, the private, self-determining, unique, autonomous ego.

For the first time in Western history, according to this idea of the Renaissance, the driving cultural and creative force became the individual’s desire to be *different*, to distinguish oneself from the crowd of others:

The general European consensus is that the era of the Italian Renaissance created what we call individuality. By this is meant a state of inner and external liberation of the individual from the communal forms of the Middle Ages, forms which had constricted the pattern of his life, his activities, and his fundamental impulses through homogenizing groups. These had, as it were, allowed the boundaries of the individual to become blurred, suppressing the development of personal freedom, of intrinsic uniqueness, and of the sense of responsibility for one’s self. I will set aside the question whether the Middle Ages lacked all traces of individuality. The conscious emphasis on individuality as a matter of principle does seem to have been the original accomplishment of the Renaissance. This took place in such a way that the will to power, to distinction, and to becoming honored and famous was diffused among men to a degree never before known. If for a time at the beginning of this period, as has been reported, there was no pervasive fashion in masculine attire, since each man wished to deport himself in a manner peculiar to himself, it was not a