LA CELESTINA (Fernando de Rojas, 1499)

I. Cultural background: Renaissance (El Renacimiento) in Europe

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A. **Definition**: Originally a French word whose literal meaning is *rebirth*, the term has been applied metaphorically to a wide variety of phenomena ranging from an experience in the life history of an individual to the characterization of the culture of an entire epoch. Although “renaissance” is used to describe cultural “rebirth” or “flowering” of widely different times and places (Byzantine renaissance, Carolingian renaissance, American renaissance), these usages are derived by analogy from the most common meaning of the word. As a proper noun, Renaissance is usually applied to the civilization of Europe, particularly that of Italy, in the period from the 14th through the 16th century. This usage implies not only that European civilization during these centuries enjoyed a particularly brilliant cultural outburst but also that this age marks a decisive turn in historical evolution, the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times.

B. **History of the concept**: The idea of “rebirth” was common in both classical and Christian sources. Greek and Roman mythology and religion contained frequent instances of sudden miraculous renewals of power in the lives of individual heroes. With Christianity, these ideas took on a spiritual emphasis, and it became a commonplace from the time of the Gospels onward to speak of the rebirth of a soul in Christ. Elements of both traditions were combined in early thinking about the Renaissance.

Speaking of the humanists’ perception of a rebirth, in the 14th and 15th centuries in Italy there appeared a vivid consciousness of novelty in contemporary achievement in arts and letters. The idea was that the centuries between the fall of
Rome and their own time constituted a dark age, and that they (humanists) witnessed the recovery of classical civilization. So was born the periodization of history into ancient, medieval and modern times. The metaphor of rebirth with varying degrees of its Christian and classical connotations was adopted to describe the achievements of the new generations in certain specific fields that has succeeded the “dark” ages. Theses convictions first appeared among Italian humanists Petrarch and his followers, later were echoed in northern Europe during the 16th century (Erasmus, Rabelais).

The concept of the Renaissance as applied to a definite period in intellectual history thus originated with the humanists themselves, and for them it signified above all a cultural revival in which elements and forms of classical civilization were imitated from the dead. The notion also began to appear in the 16th century that not only had the ancients been recovered, but that also in some fields of endeavor new achievements unknown to Greeks and the Romans had added luster to the age (For instance: new discoveries of lands, peoples and inventions).

This view of the historical position of the 15th and 16th centuries was accepted by the historians of the age of the Enlightenment. The Renaissance meant primarily a cultural revival, and its chief emphasis was put upon artistic and literary history. In the 19th century, however, this view was broadened by the great French historian Jules Michelet, who proclaimed in a famous phrase that the Renaissance was “the discovery of the world and of men.” He became the first historian to assert that the Renaissance was more than a cultural revival, that it was the period which saw the beginning of the modern world. Soon after, the Swiss historian Jakob Burkhardt added the spirit of individualism in the notion of the Renaissance. The attack on Burkhardt’s conception began in the 20th century and came principally from students of the Middle Ages. Modern scholars have established the claim of the medievalists
that the political and economic institutions of the modern world owe much more to the developments of 12th and 13th centuries than to the Renaissance. Thus, many historians recognize the Renaissance as a useful description of an important chapter in the intellectual history rather than in the institutional history of the Western world.

C. The concept of the world and the man: As in the Renaissance period, the power of human nature was highly exalted, thus, the man was considered as independent unity and master of his/her destiny, subjected to the laws of divined nature. Any human condition which would affect man’s decision was also of notable importance (reason, emotions, instinct, etc.). In this direction, people faced the mundane life firmly, while realizing the briefness of life, they knew how to cherish and enjoy pleasures that obtained from their lives.

On the other hand, the appreciation of present world led to a wish of getting to know the Nature scientifically, in which it showed the model of entire human activity. Consequently, the art of “nature” and the increasing prestige of the “bucólico” topic-them of the “Beatus ille” and of the “Golden Age”, dealing with an attitude that was to regard the peasant life as perfect due to its natural, sincere existence -- became in fashion. Some essential elements of the Renaissance ideology are as follows:

1. Appearance of the spirit of independence.
2. Exaltation of human conditions: reason, instincts, emotions, etc.
3. Valuation of earthly life in front of the supernatural one.
4. Eagerness of scientific knowledge.
5. Appreciation of the Nature and the “natural” in life and art.
6. Influence of the classical concept of the world.
II. **La Celestina**: author, editions.

Fernando de Rojas (1465? – 1541?) was said to be a converted Jewish lawyer, however, there existed almost no biographical data on Rojas himself. Indeed, many scholars have questioned his authorship of the tragicomedy, though a poem in the work names him as the author, and he was further identified as such in the records of an Inquisition trial of the period. Critics now generally believe that Fernando de Rojas wrote most- if not all- **La Celestina**.

It is generally said that next to **Don Quijote**, the greatest work in all Spanish literature is the dramatized novel, **La Celestina**. Due to its different editions, the work has problems of authorship. It first appeared in Burgos (1499) as the **Comedia de Calisto y Melibea**, in 16 acts. Later editions (Sevilla, 1502) bore the title **Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea** and contained 21 acts. It is universally known, however, by the name of the principal character, **Celestina**, the cynical and avaricious “go-between”.

III. **Plot/Argument**

Calisto, who was of lineage noble, suddenly entered in the garden of Melibea, the young and beautiful lady, and Calisto crazily fell in love with her. Melibea refused him, but the old Celestina, to whom Calisto consulted for help, set up a date for both, after convincing Melibea with her sinuous ability. Calisto and Melibea consummated love with joy. Celestina received a golden chain from Calisto as reward, however, that let to the greed of Calisto’s two servants who murdered the old procuress. While the murderers were about to be punished by justice, another series of tragedies were to be occurred. One night being with Melibea, Calisto heard some noise from the street, he came out, slipped on the ladder and died of falling. Very desperate, Melibea ended her life by throwing herself from a huge tower at her father’s sight, Pleberio.
IV. Characters

The greatness of *La Celestina*, a novel in dialogue form, lies in the masterly delineation of its characters both major and minor. The analysis of passion and the dramatic conflict were worked out with such psychological intensity as to make this the first masterpiece of Spanish realist novel.

The principal characters—Calisto, Melibea and Celestina—beyond time and space, reach to universality and eternity. Calisto represents the neoplatonism of the epoch, particularly with his idealist concept of the beloved (*la amada*), which becomes an authentic worship/homage to the supreme beauty: “Melibea soy y a Melibea adoro y en Melibea creo”. From this quote, it tells us that the beloved is something ideal and supreme for the young noble, somewhat a “quijote-like” idealist. Critics, however, such as María Rosa Lida, summarize the essence of Calisto’s character in selfishness (*egoísmo*), with changeable conscience, between reality and illusion, and with fluctuation of emotions.

Melibea represents in the entire Renaissance the woman, sensuality and serene and eternal beauty, corresponding to pictorial conceptions of Leonardo and Rafael. The descriptions of Melibea by the author reveals not only the detailed technique of the Renaissance, but also the double character of the “tipo” of Melibea: sensual/voluptuous, and stylish. She is personification of the eternal woman, carnal and spiritual at the same time.

Celestina comes from the medieval tradition of the “anus” of the “Pamphilus” and of la Trotaconventos in *El Libro de Buen Amor* by Juan Ruiz. The character is the conception of Middle Ages, representing witchcraft (*brujería*), tricks/snares (*artimañas*) and genius to deal with clandestinely what Christian moralists called sins (*pecado*); also symbol of “wisdom” which Ramiro de Maeztu mentioned, in that with
selfish vision, in exchange for her own benefit, Celestina was dedicated to the service of love. Menéndez Pelayo even called her as “sublime de mala voluntad”. Nevertheless, the old procurress is depicted with a realism unsurpassed in Spanish letters to demonstrate human nature.

V. Dramatic Conflict. Medievalism vs. Renaissance

La Celestina is published between the end of Middle Ages and early Renaissance period, containing a double but contradictory conception of life. The conflict between Christianity and sensuality, law and punishment, is accountable for the tragic solution and ending, very similar to what happened in Tristán and Cárceles del amor. We would say that morality, sentences, pessimism in the end belong to characteristics of Medieval Epoch. Those “human” aspects, instead, in especial exultant, fresh and alive sensuality or love consummation (the love scene in the garden), are concerning the new meaning of “pleasure” and life of Renaissance.