

'RENAISSANCE IN FRANCE, ITS HISTORY AND
ITS LITERATURE:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY'

by GREGORY DE ROCHER and BERNERD C. WEBER

THE trend toward interdisciplinary study is becoming well-established, despite inevitable conflicts arising from our traditional university divisions. The development of a course or seminar attempting to draw parallels between the political and literary behavior of a given period and country might well have been opposed by either or both of the departments of history and language, not to mention curriculum committees. New structures, however, now facilitate such investigations, both within and outside existing terms and programs. Thus, during the regular term, General Studies, Honors Classes, or similar relatively recent additions to the curriculum roster offer courses created by groups of instructors or even by students and instructors. Interim Terms, on the other hand, as a sort of pause in the academic calendar, more easily lend themselves to the pooling of students and instructors wishing to widen their experience in particular subjects or periods without draining the staff or equipment necessary for the maintenance of operating programs.

We propose to relate here the experience of an interdisciplinary course offered during such an Interim Term. Although some details may be applicable only to our situation at the University of Alabama, many aspects, *mutatis mutandis*, could be adopted for similar courses elsewhere. At least three major differences, we should like to point out, separate the type of course we developed and taught from the very interesting *cours pluridisciplinaire* described recently by Palomba Paves-Yashinsky.¹ To begin with, ours was a team effort: major political and economic developments of the period were delineated by the history instructor while the literature was presented by the language instructor. Next is the fact that our course lasted only three weeks, the length of the Interim Term

¹"Le Réalisme en littérature et en peinture dans la deuxième moitié du dix-neuvième siècle en France": Remarques sur un cours pluridisciplinaire,' *French Review*, 47, No. 3 (1947), 566-72.

(May 13 to May 31). The third point is that we were seeking to bring as much of the period as possible to students not yet familiar with sixteenth-century France.

Our course was spurred into existence by the accumulation of various regrets over the systems in which we found ourselves locked. There was too little time in the formal courses to treat as much as we would like the history behind the literature or, respectively, the literature as it reflected institutions, events and habits of life and thought. In two different departments, two courses, *The History of the Renaissance* with its would-be counterpart *The Literature of the Renaissance*, were providing for two different disciplines. Only too obvious were the advantages to be gained by uniting them. The Interim Term conveniently provided this opportunity.

The period dealt with in the course was divided into two major movements: the French Renaissance and the Reformation. Various aspects of the historical background were covered and accompanied by the EMC filmstrip lectures on the Renaissance. The historical section of this course provided a sketch of the principal political developments in French history from the reign of Charles VIII (1483-1498) to the assassination of Henry IV in Paris in May, 1610. Attention was focused on the institutional aspects of this period, especially the monarchy, the social structure, the legal aspects of society, and the growing importance of urban development. The serious impact of the outbreak of the civil-religious struggle between Catholics and Huguenots which began in March, 1562, and which continued intermittently until nearly the end of the sixteenth century received special attention. Mimeographed sheets distributed to the students, and which covered such topics as French interests in overseas expansion during the sixteenth century, the significant peace treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis of April, 1559 (involving the dynastic interests of the royal houses of Habsburg, Valois, and Tudor), and similar topics greatly facilitated the work of the lecturer in covering much basic groundwork. Inasmuch as the class was small there was ample time for students to ask questions and thereby clear up any possible misunderstandings. Because many students lacked an adequate grasp of French geography, a mimeographed list of critical places in France at the time was given to the student to learn, and a subsequent map test spurred on those who might possibly have neglected this aspect of the course.

In regard to the literature, after an introduction on the classical

and medieval traditions and the role of Italian and other European literature, attention was directed to three *Grands Rhétoriciens* in an attempt to understand the type of writing cultivated by the *courtisans* of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Particularly interesting were Clément Marot's 'epitres' to François Ier: allusions accompanied by his playful wit are frequently made to such recent happenings as the Collège Royal, the increasingly overshadowing movement of Evangelism, but also to minor and more personal incidents such as his interest in Anne d'Alençon or his misadventures with an untrustworthy valet. A major literary as well as historical figure was the talented Marguerite de Navarre, sister of the king and also a protector of Marot; both her religious poetry and her sometime ribald tales were found to give a more complete account of the tastes of Renaissance readers. François Rabelais, with his giants and his energetic trickster Panurge, was seen to embody the contemporary qualities of exuberance, play, discovery, and erudition as displayed by the humanists and, less gloriously, by fossilized tutors; a film on this perplexing author entitled 'Jusques au feu exclusive' lent by the French Cultural Services animated even more the moments spent on *Pantagruel*. Pierre de Ronsard and Joachim Du Bellay in the area of French poetic hegemony contributed to the nationalistic spirit which reigned throughout the middle of the century. Ronsard's *poésie engagée*, it was felt, announced the more turbulent works to flow from the pens of the Baroque poets. Both Catholics and Protestants, the students noted, used a powerful if not violent imagery in their works. Jean de Sponde, Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas, Agrippa D'Aubigné, and the numerous participants of *La Vertu du Catholicon d'Espagne* are but a few who expressed vehement political and religious passions over the edicts, massacres, and wars during the last half of the century. More sober recounts of the events were read in the works of Blaise de Monluc and Michel de l'Hospital, while Jean Bodin formulated a policy supporting a powerful monarch. Another voice spoke out more softly on the troubles of the period: Michel de Montaigne offered in what was possibly the keenest of detail the workings of a reflective mind in self-chosen seclusion during the closing decades of the French Reformation.

This rapid resumé scarcely conveys the amount of material our concentrated schedule permitted us to cover. In order to fulfill the requirements laid down by the College concerning the number of contact hours necessary for a given course to award three credit

hours, daily meetings of three hours were held. Although the history and the literature of the period constituted the heart of the course, guest lecturers on the music and the furniture of the Renaissance provided an enjoyable variation in the students' concentration on the subject matter. Two volumes donated by the cultural attaché served a similar purpose; *L'Art monumental* and the fascinating engravings of *L'Ecole de Fontainebleau* afforded visual proof of the classical heritage and the brilliant luxury of the French courts. A book by the distinguished sixteenth century French humanist, Adrien Turnèbe's *Philosophiae et Graecarum literarum regii professoris . . .* (Paris, 1580), was also examined by the students so that they might perceive at first hand something of the nature of French printing and binding of the late Renaissance period. Other visual studies were facilitated by still more gifts and loans from the French Cultural Services: posters illustrating Renaissance *châteaux* and several slide series on the art, scientific discoveries, architecture, and even handicraft of the time.²

In spite of the effort required before and during such a course, the experience was a rewarding one, for a number of the students found the experiment as stimulating as it was demanding. The instructors as well found it a challenge to present the complex interrelationships of political, social, and cultural life which provided the foundations for the growth of one of the great nations of Western Europe.

²We wish to express our deep gratitude to Monsieur Gérard Roubichou, Cultural Attaché at New Orleans, whose immediate response and generosity contributed to the success of the course.