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TWELFTH CENTURY CRITICS AND HUMANISTS

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THE PRESENT paper is not intended to be a treatment of criticism and of humanism, as such, in the twelfth century. It deals rather with five specific writers, Englishmen all by birth or by adoption, active for the most part in the second half of the century. Moreover, they are critics, not as judges of art and literature are critics, but as columnists and commentators are critics, critics of their time: men who are unusually sensitive to what goes on round about them in public and in private, and who are outspoken in the judgment they pass on what they see. Whether they are "humanists" or not will depend on our understanding of that elusive term. If they are, it will be of interest to inquire to what extent the "humanism" that we are willing to accord them is connected with their being critics. The first part of the paper will touch upon some aspects of humanism in the twelfth century; the second part will introduce our group of critics: John of Salisbury, Peter of Blois, Walter Map, Gerald of Wales and Ralph Niger.

To say "humanism in the twelfth century" is to evoke the idea of "renaissance" in the twelfth century and one is thereby led inescapably to the question of Renaissance and renaissances, a question that has been much debated since an anti-Burckhardt opinion began to form in reaction to his and Michelet's supposed oversimplification of the fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance as "the discovery of the world and of man". Much of the debate has turned around the use of terms: whether "renaissance" is to be taken in the strictest etymological sense, of a rebirth that is not only something new but something completely different from what has immediately preceded it, or whether it does not apply also, in a broader sense, to a mere revival or reinvigorating of what was actually there all the time but had become somnolent, if not dormant. Some of the debaters would maintain, too, that the notion of "renaissance" is linked necessarily with a "rebirth" of, or reversion to, Classical Antiquity, while others hold it to be equally applicable to *any* more or less universal efflorescence of art, literature, philosophy, science and social accomplishment after a period of decay and stagnation; still others go so far as to claim the word for any quickening of life in any field whatsoever. The debate takes a clearly historical turn when scholars of the anti-Burckhardt persuasion attempt to prove that the so-called Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is in reality but the direct outgrowth of the Middle Ages, one further manifestation only of a phenomenon several times repeated in the Middle Ages, albeit with

[1] Historians have now become quite accustomed to the terms: First Italian Renaissance (as distinguished from the full flowering of the 15th and 16th centuries), Twelfth Century Renaissance, Ottonian Renaissance, Carolingian Renaissance, Anglo-Saxon Renaissance, — all in the West, without speaking of the multiple revivals at Byzantium to which some would refuse the name Renaissance on the ground that there was always too much *survival* of classical traditions at Constantinople to admit of full-scale *revivals*.

some difference of point of view.[1] Intertwined with this whole controversy is another over "humanism". Is the distinguishing mark of a "renaissance" its humanism? If so, in what sequence? Is a new interest in humanism to be equated with the "rebirth" of which we speak, or is it rather the cause that provokes a quickening, a reawakening, a reinvigorating? Or, conversely, does some reawakening of a society direct attention more or less inevitably to man and to man's activities in such a way that the "rebirth" is the cause of a new interest in humanism?

Still more fundamental is the question: what is humanism? Most would now reject any definition limiting it to an interest in Classical letters that is literary only, if not purely etymological. But, granting this, has humanism to do primarily with Classical letters at all, with Classical art and Classical philosophy? Is the view of man there presented so basic that it alone merits the designation of humanism? Is the word not applicable as well to *any* concept of man, his nature, his activities and his destiny, whether in agreement with the Classical view or not? Can there not be, for example, a characteristically Christian humanism? A final question: does "humanism" necessarily have a scholarly connotation? Is it inseparably linked with a literary, artistic and philosophical presentation, more or less formal, of the concept of man? Or may we not apply the term likewise to a simple interest in, and feeling for, men in their everyday occupations and preoccupations, ideals and experiences?[2]

So many questions remain unanswered, so many problems remain unsolved! One would hardly say that the controversy still *rages*, but it does still *go on*, as is evidenced by the number of books and articles on the subject even within the past five years.[3] The results of the many-sided controversy interest us here only in so far as our view of the twelfth century is affected thereby. No one, I venture to say, would now seriously question the fact that an age which has been traditionally called the Renaissance and which extends roughly from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century is marked by typical characteristics enough to warrant treating it as a very distinct period in history; why quarrel then with the designation "Renaissance" which does serve to convey certain of these characteristics and which has, in any

[2] It must be in this sense that a text quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* uses the term when it refers to "the ample wisdom and bland morality of such a *humanist* as Shakespeare".

[3] The earlier literature on the subject is enormous; so much so that whole books are now written on the history of the notion of "Renaissance". One of the best is that of W. K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (New York, 1948) which takes into account most of what had been said up to that time; it, however, has not prevented other expressions of opinion on the subject, beginning with the article-length review of Ferguson's book by Hans Baron in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XI (1950), 493-510. To mention only a few: W. A. Nitze, "The So-called Renaissance of the Twelfth Century", *Speculum*, XXIII (1948), 464-471; W. K. Ferguson, "The Renaissance: a Synthesis", *Renaissance News*, III (1950), 41-43 (résumé of a paper delivered before the Modern Language Association at New York on Dec. 28, 1950); Urban T. Holmes, "The Idea of a Twelfth Century Renaissance", *Speculum*, XXVI (1951), 643-651; Eva M. Sanford, "The Twelfth Century Renaissance or Proto-Renaissance", *Speculum*, XXVI (1951), 635-642; E. H. Wilkins, "On the Nature and Extent of the Italian Renaissance", *Italica*, XXVII (1950), 67-76; M. D. Chenu, "L'Homme et la nature: perspectives sur la renaissance du XIIe siècle", *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen-age*, (1952), 39-66.

case, grown into our usages? Where the controversy has served a useful purpose is in identifying these distinguishing characteristics more precisely and in tracing more accurately the antecedents of the period usually called the Renaissance. It has also shown that there are, in addition, earlier periods that are certainly not unworthy of the name "renaissance". Outstanding among these is the one that is referred to, since the time of Charles Homer Haskins, as "The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century". Actually its roots reach back to the early eleventh and its ardour has hardly cooled by the thirteenth. The abundant research that Haskins precipitated now makes it clear that there was a true revival in this period, a recovery and a reawakening. It shows too that there is much in the age that was entirely new. What characterizes it most is the air of freshness and vigour that blows through it, whether of complete novelty or rather of renewal only.

It comes as a distinct surprise to realize how many of the notes that we associate with the Renaissance of the later period are precisely the ones that, in different degree and with different emphases, characterize the twelfth century: [4] an appeal to the validity of reason and an investigation of the natural causes of things; partly connected with this, a new turning to nature both by way of simple awareness and observation and by way of more deliberate study; an obviously critical spirit that manifests itself in regard to miracles and relics, magic and superstitions, as also in regard to the supposedly authoritative texts of the schools; a curiosity and a thirst for knowledge that crowd the roads leading to Paris and the other seats of learning; a touch of secularism, if not anti-clericalism, and an insistence on the lay orders in society; a distinctly personal and subjective note in literary utterances from the love theme of troubadors and courtly romances to the autobiographical elements in the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise and the highly "individualistic" tone of numerous other writings; the appearance of vernacular literatures and of national themes in history; an art that shakes itself free of the hieratic and stylized forms of Romanesque to stir into natural movement and natural expression, where the observation of nature, noted above, and the observation of man are clearly reflected; social and political developments that, without being upheavals, are profound in their effects; [5] technical achievements that may appear to us of the twentieth century as remarkably unspectacular but that are epoch-making just the same and constitute a veritable technical revolution. [6]

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[4] E. Panofsky agrees with T. E. Mommsen in regarding the distinctive note of the later Renaissance to be not its innovations, as such, but the *consciousness* of entering upon a "new time" and an *enthusiasm* for it; see Panofsky, "Renascence and Renascences", *Kenyon Review,* VI (1944), 230 and Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the Dark Ages", *Speculum,* XVII (1942), 242.

[5] What had been the "feudal age" was being transformed by the rise of towns with their new associations and loyalties, their trade and commercial groupings, their urban movements to obtain a degree of independence; national monarchs were asserting themselves; curial offices of administration were growing in number and in importance; institutions to safeguard liberty, but liberty with responsibility, were making their appearance; political theory was developing new points of view.

One might add to this long list what could well have been placed at its head: an increased knowledge of, and interest in, the Classics of antiquity (Latin, almost exclusively) and a literary output under their influence that imitates and uses the Classics both in style and in theme; and finally, an appeal to the authority of antiquity in the ardent recourse to the philosophy of Aristotle and to the law of ancient Rome. Even in the narrower sense of the term, this literary influence would justify speaking of a "humanism" in the twelfth century. But it is the other things, too, that, to my mind, are likewise indicative of a real humanism, a humanism that is manifested less in literary and artistic productions than in an outlook or a "mental climate" that stresses truly human things and human values as they had not been stressed for centuries. What is more thoroughly human than the very traits mentioned above: emphasis on reason, interest in nature, a more articulated expression of one's inner feelings, a trend towards freedom tempered with responsibility, an evolution of the temporal order in economic, social and political spheres, and the invention of devices and techniques to meet man's everyday needs? It would be misleading to suggest that these dominate the twelfth century; they certainly do not, but they are present, — and in considerable quantity.

An acquaintance with the literature of the twelfth century, and even with its archival sources, leaves one with the distinct impression of a concern for man, a concern for human interests, ideals, feelings and activities, that is new. In the writings of earlier centuries, man had been regarded largely as an essence, a species, a type; he was primarily an ethical or a religious entity. Suddenly in the twelfth century — in so far as literary evidence is concerned — we meet man as a concrete individual, in his material and social, earthly setting, engaged with everyday occupations and preoccupations. Twelfth century writers do not lose sight of the fact that man is a wayfarer whose destiny is ultimately a superterrestrial and supernatural one; by some this is stressed exclusively; nevertheless, there is in this century an awareness of, an interest in, and a literary expression of, what we usually term the natural, the material, the temporal and the human, that are without precedent for centuries back. Writers of Classical antiquity were preoccupied with just such things as these and formulated their reflections upon them. Indeed, is it not precisely this in them that we call "humanism"?

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[6] The production of energy made startling advances, especially through the perfecting of machines to harness water power and to produce rotary movements, such as water-wheels and windmills (first known in Western Europe in 1105) and devices, too, for the lifting of weights; new instruments of war like the crossbow threatened the superiority of the mounted knight and appeared murderous enough to the people of the time to lead the Second Lateran Council to outlaw it in 1139; the invention of the collar in the harnessing of animals multiplied their traction power many times over and gradually transformed rural life; improved methods of bridge-building greatly facilitated overland communication; sea travel was being improved, at the same time, by the fixed rudder, which was first used in 1180; but it is the invention of the compass that was truly revolutionary for it made unlimited navigation possible, favoured mercantilism, helped the bourgeois to supplant the nobility in influence, and ultimately displaced Europe's centre of gravity from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. One can hardly refrain from adding to the list the growing use of mechanical clocks which was inaugurating that rationalization of time which was completely unknown before but has been with us increasingly and inexorably ever since.

This, in any case, is the type of humanism I have in mind when I call the writers, with whom we are here concerned, "humanists". Not that they would not qualify as humanists in the narrower sense; the study of the Classics (Latin always, of course) finds no stauncher defenders in the twelfth century, if not in the whole Middle Ages, than John of Salisbury, Peter of Blois, Gerald of Wales and Ralph Niger. They recall with pleasure, not to say enthusiasm, what their reading of the texts of antiquity has meant to them. They deplore, on the other hand, the shift of emphasis within the Trivium from grammar (not the formal grammar that we associate with that word but a veritable course in literature) to dialectics (the abuse of which can readily become the logic-chopping of which John of Salisbury complains) ; the result, in their eyes, is a growing and lamentable superficiality. They bewail, too, the rush of students to the "practical" faculties of medicine and law, while the liberal arts, like theology, are being neglected. Humanistic passages of this sort could be cited from all our writers, but it is less to this than to their humanism in the broader sense that I would call attention. They are men whose eyes are opened wide on the human scene around them, and the lively account they give of what they observe is far removed from the impersonal and uncircumstanced report of the annalist and chronicler. Nor do they stop with merely reporting in detail; they reflect, react, judge and criticize. Perhaps their clerical status has something to do with this. Certainly they are not free from moralizing, but even their moralizing is not that of a general statement illustrated by stock, hypothetical examples; they deal with concrete cases, more often than not from their own experience, and they react directly, subjectively and sometimes violently to them. It may be a question of food and clothing, games and pastimes; it may be the foibles and inanities, the weariness and the corruption of life at the court; it may be the schools and their changing programmes; it may be crafts and trades, the dispensation of justice, government administration both civil and ecclesiastical; it may be international affairs. They run the whole gamut of human life and conduct. By their fluent criticism, which becomes at times polished satire, they are far more akin to a Valla and an Erasmus than to their predecessors or to a great many of their own contemporaries.[7]

* * * *

In conclusion, let it be said that we must not exaggerate the humanism of these twelfth-century Englishmen. Obviously, if the word humanism is to carry any suggestion of opposition to, or complete independence of, what is divine and supernatural, it would not apply to them. However, there is a tendency to think of the Middle Ages as being so absorbed in an atmosphere of faith as to deprecate reason, so preoccupied with the spiritual so as to forget the temporal, so intent upon the supernatural as to view with suspicion what is natural and, in the case of man, what is human only, (as distinguished from heavenly). Just how far such a dichotomy and conscious opposition, on the one hand, or absorption, on the other, may have existed at certain moments in the Middle Ages, is not our problem here. All I wish to conclude is that, in the men we have been considering — and they are not alone — there is a sufficient curiosity about, observation of, and feeling for, the things of nature to warrant ascribing to them, in some limited degree at least, a certain *naturalism*. There is sufficient respect for the rôle of reason and for the use of it in investigating causes (even where religious matters are concerned) to speak of a healthy *rationalism*. There is finally so evident an interest in the ordinary, every-day, earthly life of men (whether their own personal experiences or those of others around them) to permit us to speak of a true *humanism* (in the sense, at least, that we are able to speak of a man like Shakespeare as a "humanist"). All of these same traits are present in the Humanism of the later Renaissance: indeed, they are held to be characteristic of it and to influence the view of human life and conduct, the art, the politics, etc., of that period. It used to be customary to regard them as, in some way, the result of a turning again to antiquity for inspiration, the result therefore of humanism taken in the narrower sense of an interest in the art, letters, philosophy and life of antiquity as revealed in a renewed and closer study of these in original sources. If I am not mistaken, more recent students of the Renaissance reverse the order.[8] The tendency now is to see a profound economic, political and social crisis, as well as intellectual, moral and religious, developing in Western Europe, at least from the beginning of the fourteenth century on. The resultant Renaissance society that begins to evolve finds inspiration and models more suited to its culture in the Classics rather than in the "feudal" and "ecclesiastical" tradition of the foregoing period. The revival of antiquity does act as a causative force, but as a secondary one only; it proves congenial only because of antecedent and contemporary changes in the entire social and intellectual structure. I believe the case is similar for the twelfth century. That there is a revived interest in the Classics of Rome (Seneca, Horace, Cicero, Ovid, Virgil, Lucan, Livy, Perseus, Juvenal, the Grammarians, etc.) is beyond question. That they affected the "Renaissance of the Twelfth Century" is likewise clear, but they did not cause it. There is a movement already in progress in art, letters and thought, as well as in social, economic and political forms. It is quite possible of course that, in this case as in the later one, scholars found in the writers of antiquity a spirit congenial to these newer forms and ideas and that these then served to advance the movement yet further.

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[7] Because of the limited space available for publication, it has been found necessary to omit the central portion of the paper as it was read. This part consisted principally of sketches of the five writers mentioned at the beginning and excerpts from their writings that illustrate their humanism of the type described above and that prove, I hope, their right to be called humanists as well as critics.

The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century never moves out of a distinctly Christian framework and, for all their interest in nature, man and reason, the writers of the period see man primarily as a creature of God destined to a supernatural (and therefore more than purely human) life, the achievement of which is to take place in the course of his earthly existence in time and space and must be always his chief concern, however real and preoccupying his engagement in temporal and terrestrial things may be. There is unquestionably something new and fresh about the twelfth century's interest in man, reason and nature. But there is never any question, for the people of this time, of these replacing God, faith and grace. The emphasis upon them in the twelfth century has a quite different result: it begins to pose, perhaps as never before, the problem of the proper relationship of the two in a single synthesis, the problem of the autonomy of those things on the natural side which had tended to be underestimated, if not submerged, in the previous period, the problem, too, of the part that these very things have to play in the achieving of man's overall destiny. The twelfth century does little more than raise these problems by its acuter awareness of the natural, temporal and even secular aspects of human life. It is the thirteenth century that moves towards solutions, both in the doctrinal teaching of the schools and in the concrete reality of experience, although the latter is not always the fruit of a conscious application of the former. In the realm of theory, there comes immediately to mind a synthesis like the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, where reason has a noble rôle in the science of God and where the author's chief preoccupation is to show the exact relationship that exists between reason and faith, nature and grace, man and God, without minimizing for a single instant the rôle of the former in each of these pairs. [9] In the practical order, on the other hand, political events bring the concept of an autonomous temporal state to the fore and, from the thirteenth century on, political philosophy takes a new turn. Changing economic conditions likewise effect changes; the urbanization of life and the development of commerce focus attention on material things, on their use and their exploitation, in such a way as to necessitate the integration of these into the Christian society of the time. Even the very life of the Church sees a new pattern emerge. Monastic withdrawal, which had been regarded as the perfect condition for achieving the ideal expression of the City of God upon earth, can no longer meet the needs; the leaven has to be cast into the world where a new civilization is arising; the meeting of the Church and the world becomes somewhat more like that of apostolic times and ways have to be found whereby the light of evangelical truths can be refracted into a new social economy. The appearance of the Franciscans and Dominicans is at least one response to the challenge: a form of religious life resulting from, based upon, and intended for, the growing towns and cities.

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[8] Cf. W. K. Ferguson, "The Renaissance: a Synthesis", *Renaissance News*, III (1950), 42-43.

Our twelfth century is still far from all this; it reveals rather just the acceptance of profane realities at the modest level of everyday experience of terrestrial life: a very modest humanism no doubt, not unmixed with reactionary criticism even on the part of those who exemplify it, but a real humanism, I trust, for all its limitations.

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[9] His texts on the freedom and responsibility of man, for instance, or on the rôle of human providence, on man as co-creator with God, are, in a sense, as profoundly humanist as anything written by pagan authors.

DISCUSSION

Professor Lower asked if Father Flahiff had read Professor White's paper in the "American Historical Review" in which the author coupled a new interest in Nature and life to the swing from Platonism to Aristotalianism. Architecture had reflected this trend. By the Twelfth Century Europe was settling down and experiencing freshening currents of trade. We are looking at a new civilization in Western Europe. *N. C. Cantor* said that the idea of the Renaissance should be abandoned by historians. Recent historical work on the 11th and 12 centuries has seemed to modify old attitudes towards the Middle Ages. To view the whole Middle Ages as a succession of Renaissances and recessions was naive. He suggested that Father Flahiff did not fully appreciate the importance of the German and Italian writers of the eleventh century who dealt with fundamental problems of men and human nature — such for instance as Peter Damiani. Too much has been made of a knowledge of Cicero as the sign of intellectual rebirth. This rebirth goes back beyond the twelfth to the tenth and eleventh centuries. The coming to the fore of dialectic in the Middle Ages must be emphasized. It came as early as the tenth century. John of Salisbury was behind the times in deploring this. Secularism and Cynicism were well defined in European thought by 1170. *Father Flahiff* said that the word Renaissance can with justification be applied to the twelfth century, though it was an unfortunate word. It really meant a new mental climate. He felt that the twelfth century was a century of vigour and was more entitled to the name than any of the others. In the eleventh century the problems were being stated in terms of a one society concept. The idea of the temporal state was beginning to emerge in the twelfth century. By the thirteenth century it was a fact. He felt that *Mr. Cantor* had done him and John of Salisbury an injustice by drawing attention to a single remark quoted from John of Salisbury. John of Salisbury did in fact have a great respect for logic. He referred to the spirit of anti-clericalism in the towns; but the towns did not fit into the feudal pattern. Anti-clericalism and a spirit of freedom and independence was definitely apparent in the twelfth century. *Dean Fieldhouse* said that in the 1920's the C.H.A. was absorbed in Responsible Government and Exploration; in the 1930's joint sessions were held with the C.P.S.A. in symposium form; in the 1940's papers were grouped about various selected topics. The programmes in the 1950's are now diverse in character and include general papers on European, medieval and British history as well as on Canadian history. In these circumstances he suggested that papers might well be mimeographed for distribution prior to the meetings and that the authors might give only a summary of their sources and their main thesis. In this way it would be possible to get more and worthwhile discussion. *Mr. Powicke* appreciated the inclusion of this part of the program, found the papers good and interesting, and felt that there was an obvious healthy response under the present method of programming.