

BETWEEN MIDDLE AGES AND HUMANISM

DANTE belongs to two epochs—to what, chronology apart, we call the Middle Ages, and to the tendency known as Humanism. The *De Monarchia* belongs to the Middle Ages that are passing away, the *Divine Comedy* to the Middle Ages that live on, to dawning Humanism, and to the legacy of the Middle Ages to Humanism.

It is one of the commonest distortions in our historical outlook, and one of the hardest to correct, to consider Humanism as a negation of the Middle Ages. Such an attitude supposes the two epochs in utter antithesis, the second a revolt against the first, a total opposition of values, implying sheer discontinuity between the Middle Ages and Humanism. There are certain historians who go so far as to cut the whole of the Middle Ages out of the process of thought, joining up Humanism to Greco-Roman thought, art and culture, and taking primitive Christianity into account only in so far as showing the influence of Alexandrian philosophy. On the other hand, not a few Catholic apologists not only extol the Middle Ages beyond the warrant of realities, but minimise the negative aspects of that civilization, which they see as entirely and solely Christian. They too admit a discontinuity between the two epochs, with this difference, that they do not believe the thread has ever been joined up, in spite of the tentative of the Counter Reformation, or that, less effectual, of Catholic Romanicism.

Apart from their various controversial aspects, *hinc et inde*, this conception rules out any sociologico-historical interpretation of human process. History is a process without discontinuity; the past resolves itself into the present, bearing with it the good and evil realized by events. The trend is always towards the rational, either real or seeming; the process is not always progress in an absolute sense, but admits of stasis and retrogression, never wholly complete because of a constant measure of rationality and of unify-

ing tendency. The new elements brought into history by men of genius, sages and saints, those who by greatness and mind are or appear expressions of mighty personalities, and through whom we see most clearly the divine imprint in history; or else by anonymous masses, impelled by exceptional happenings, are always living elements in a social whole. Even in periods of moral darkness we never fail to find a sense of an origin not in ourselves, of a goal outside ourselves; we are never devoid of a working intuition of our contingency and of the primal and finalistic need of the Absolute. This, the basic idea of our 'Historicism,' is not belied by facts, not even by the affirmation of Humanism, or of any other revolutionary tendency such as we see in epochs of maturation, as in that of Socratic Hellenism or the French Revolution.

From opposing camps, philosophers, historians and apologists assert that Humanism brought a reversal of values: that mediaeval thought was theocentric, individually and socially, and that humanist thought, individually and socially, was anthropocentric. Hence the word Humanism, taken to mean that the idea of man was basic and culminating. But even at the height of the humanist conception, to style its thought, art and life as anthropocentric, as opposed to theocentric, seems a facile and ill-justified synthesis of so varied and complex an epoch. A one-sided consideration has embraced a single series of manifestations, forgetful of the rest; intellectualist and artistic motives are overstressed at the expense of all the others dominant in social life. More especially in philosophy and art, the Greco-Roman period is compared with the Italian Renaissance, and the two welded in an historical pseudo-synthesis. Hence the belief in a division which only the anti-historical rationalism of the eighteenth century could accept as real, and which has been repeated ever since through mental inertia.

The most characteristic feature of the humanist epoch and its further developments through the Renaissance and the modern conception of life is the search for the concrete,

in philosophy, art, politics, religion—attitudes of mind, an historical reality contrasting with the abstract formalism that in the same period reached its worst excesses. The quest for the concrete did not stop short at mere expressions of thought, but created realist currents in every aspect of life, in relation to nature and the conquest of nature, to man and his history, to God and to communication with God.

The theocentric and the anthropocentric, if taken one as the negation of the other, falsify understanding of history, which has never been wholly humanised or wholly divinised. If they are understood as two terms of the spiritual dynamics of man, present in each one of us as in social life, they cannot be taken as indicating different epochs, since in every epoch as in every person the two tendencies are now united, now in opposition. If indeed it is sought merely to emphasize the predominance of one or the other in the significance of given historical events, to be accurate it becomes necessary to take into account all factors characteristic of the epoch in question, and to remember that both tendencies are always working in the dynamism of history, with varying efficacy, but never showing a gap or discontinuity through the elimination of one or the other.

The attraction felt by the cultured class of the late Middle Ages towards classical antiquity has three distinct aspects. The first is the revival of Roman law, which coincides with the foundation of the universities; it contributes potently to the formation of a juridical mind, to the institutional development of Church and State, and to its expression in theory. A second aspect is the philosophical. The efflorescence of Scholasticism, though primarily theological, became gradually imbued with Humanism, especially through contact with Aristotle, in successive phases leading from logic to politics. From Abelard to St. Thomas the trend is unceasing and irresistible. Aristotle is made Christian, as far as might be, mainly through the labours of St. Thomas. But Aristotle impregnates theology itself with the methods of reason. The successive phase of No-

minalism is connected with the trend towards the experimental and concrete, but grows sterile in symbols and abstractions, to give place to the triumph of Plato, the Divine Plato of Marsilio Ficino and the Renaissance. Finally, there is the third aspect, the philological or antiquarian, it too imbued with Platonism, and which remains predominant in the effort to revive the classical language, to imitate classical art, and to translate ethico-political theory into living realities.

These three aspects did not synchronize, but all found expression in a single fundamental value, that of the concrete, of the real in a human synthesis, as opposed to the ideological and logical abstractness of currents of the past. The habit of *a priori* and abstract method still dominated the mental formation of the age, and thus such currents were believed to include those represented by the scholastic realists and the romanizing jurists, making these aspects of the humanist trend appear as if opposed to its philological and artistic aspect. This has led many into error over the substance of the historical realities of the case.

The impression of a contradiction between the various aspects of Humanism was enhanced by two noteworthy factors. Above all by the entry of the laity into the lists of culture, on the same footing as ecclesiastics, and not only as legists and notaries, but as philosophers, men of letters, teachers and guides of public opinion. A second phenomenon, bound up with the first, was the formation of a cultured class, composed of laymen and ecclesiastics, intermingled and united, who as such were able to dominate and overshadow public institutions—namely the Church, kingdoms, lordships, cities, guilds, monasteries—either by assuming commanding or advisory positions in their quality of men of letters or philosophers, or by their potent contribution to the direction of thought and the spiritual transformation of the period. We find this cultured class dominant in the Council movement of the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries. It works powerfully in the princely and papal courts, centres of

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culture and art and of political activities, in which this class, as an organised *élite*, develops with an autonomy and personality of its own, above the law whether political, ecclesiastical or ethical.

The tendency to the affirmation of personality, the power of which was revealed in Dante's Divine Comedy, and which originated chiefly with the spiritual movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, showed itself in the humanist period in the formation of cultural and political *élites* in the widest sense of the word, including laymen and ecclesiastics. To tell the truth, the two camps were not very distinct, either in mental tendency or in detachment from the world, or in defence of institutions. Laymen of religious feeling and worldly ecclesiastics; laymen who become ecclesiastics or obtain benefices for the sake of reputation or power, and ecclesiastics who play the part of laymen, all intermingle. And the world is still so pervaded by the ecclesiastical organization, the influence of the mendicant orders or other religious corporations, that a pure laity as an *élite* apart does not exist. There are, it is true, captains of free companies or rulers of cities and castles—if the ruler is not a Bishop, or the Free Captain not an unfrocked friar; there are legists and notaries; but the *élite* as a whole, whether in the courts or the universities, is a mixture and real amalgam of lay and ecclesiastic. The basic economy is still feudal, save in the cities, which were slowly working free of it; there is a predominance of ecclesiastical mort-main, and an ecclesiastical administrative organization of an international character. The cultured class determined a flow of wealth in the direction of culture and art, with a liberality that was only possible in princely and religious centres, or in rich and prosperous cities.

These cultural and ruling *élites*, influenced by the study of classical antiquity—revealed to them as a world of lofty, profound and beautiful thought—assimilated all that corresponded to the mentality and needs of the time, to the thirst for knowledge, to facile reaction against the past, 10

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the new realization of political and religious ideals. The mediaeval Latin, conventional and formalist, no longer corresponded to the new humanist thought and classical trend. For the Humanism of the Renaissance, the use of the Latin of Cicero and Virgil was not merely a literary exercise, but the expression of living thought. These men of culture, all the men of culture of the age, were forging themselves a mentality which required a suitable linguistic instrument. The vulgar tongues were still in their infancy, save Italian, which had reached its full stature with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, but which was not yet general, nor extended beyond the people, and which, moreover, was confined to Tuscany. And culture was then European. National boundaries offered no obstacles to cultural contact; the Roman See moved from France to Italy, the Councils assembled cultured men from every country at Lyons, Vienne, Pisa, Constance, Basle, Florence. The culture that was a universal and European expression, at once ecclesiastical and secular, Christian and pagan, philosophic and philologic, found a language in Ciceronian Latin.

Classical enthusiasm, then, was not simply literary pedantry; its spirit was one of research, of rearrangement, of philosophical systematization, of historical adjustment, of a revision of values, ethical and aesthetic, political and religious. Certainly, these aims do not show themselves in the thought of each individual humanist, but on the whole these men felt their mission more or less clearly, and the reasons for a struggle against a past that was becoming ever more obscure and incomprehensible to them. In their desire to rebuild the ancient world, pagan and Christian, their lack of historical training led them to lose sight of the value of the Middle Ages; but all of the Middle Ages that was still living and operating they bore within themselves, and it could not fail to influence their minds and achievements.

The classical past they saw returning to life was not—save for a few narrow-minded and unimaginative men such as exist in every period—a simple re-evocation of a van-

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ished world, but a new factor that was taking its place in the historical process, in synthesis with the surviving elements of the Middle Ages.

Every historical synthesis is the work of time and of a multiplicity of factors hard of analysis. It is always dynamically in process, disintegrating and re-integrating. We lay hold of given aspects of such syntheses and give them a name because of those factors or phenomena that are most striking or best known to us, and thus we speak of Humanism. This renaissance of man as the central element of historical and social life, in thought, art and politics, was not in reaction against a God-centred Middle Ages, but a deepening of the natural life of man and its repercussions in the spiritual life. Thus the humanist achievement is not at all a negation of God as origin and end, but an attempt at co-ordination, now inward to the point of immanence—these are the times of the German mystics, from Master Eckhart to Nicholas of Cusa—now outward to the extremes of religious legalism, giving birth to the theory of two truths and two moralities.

In this wide zone between God-centre and man-centre, Humanism was the expression of a need springing not only from the cultural, but from the economic, political, national and social development of the time, a development and continuation of the same elements that the Middle Ages had already matured and quickened. In philological, historical and ethical contact with classical antiquity, these elements produced a synthesis, at once fecund and disturbing, that extends from early Humanism to the end of the Renaissance.

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