THE AGE BEFORE PRINT[1]

It is dangerous to disagree with so learned a man as Dr. Chaytor, but I cannot pretend that his recent interesting and scholarly work on medieval literature does not put one in a quarrelsome mood. A number of the views contained in it are highly disputable, and I feel that much of the rest of it is misleading, even if it cannot be definitely contradicted. The issues it raises, however, are tricky and delicate; nor are Dr. Chaytor's own positions always perfectly clear. Still, there is so much in his book that seems quite definitely misleading that a reviewer can hardly avoid hostilities, even while he acknowledges that Dr. Chaytor's learning has once again made English students of the Middle Ages his debtors.

Dr. Chaytor's purpose is to examine and characterise medieval literature from the point of view, in particular, of the way in which it reached its public; and it reached it either orally or through script, but not through print. It is in this sense that he speaks of the "importance of the difference between the literary and critical methods of the early middle ages and those of modern times", between the age of script and the age of print. We are to be shown how to understand medieval writings in the light of the fact that they were not printed.

After attempting to show how the modern reader takes in the printed word and forms the habit of continually reading quantities of print, Dr. Chaytor describes the very different medieval habits of mind. He tries to put himself in the place of the medieval reader with his eyes trained to depend on his ear, his reading depending on his hearing. Books in general were written to be *heard* first of all, and readers in general had to read with their lips as well as eyes. "The medieval reader, with few exceptions, did not read as we do; he was in the stage of our muttering childhood learner; each word was for him a separate entity . . . a problem which he whispered to himself, etc." And this habit must have affected the copying of manuscripts and should be borne in mind, Dr. Chaytor insists, by the modern textual critic.

In the next two chapters a new line of thought is opened up. What did the medievals think about language and so about the craft of letters, about 'style'? Dr. Chaytor's view of their attitude can be given in two negative statements. Medieval people did not think of language as a national thing and the test of nationality; nor did they, as poets and writers, use it as a personal possession and ex-

(1) From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Literature. By H. J. Chaytor, Litt.D. (Cambridge University Press; 12s. 6d.).

pression. The nation had not *its* language, nor the poet, properly speaking, *his*. A 'people' of course had its language, but (a) this was extremely variegated; unstandardised because unprinted: and (b) its writers only used it if and when it suited their subject-matter. "The choice of language was determined by the literary *genre* in question, and not by the nationality of the author". The frontiers of a language were literary only. Moreover, when a poet came to write he thought of words as things *outside* himself, patterned in rhetorical modes and rules (according to the *genre*), to them he tried to fit and conform himself. The modern poet, approved by Dr. Chaytor, does just the reverse. And both these medieval characteristics, but especially the creative writer's dependence on a fixed rhetoric, are due in the last resort to the unprinted state of language and the writer's dependence on oral delivery and an audience—on having to *speak* to his public. Why? Chiefly because, as I understand Dr. Chaytor's view, the medieval writer had to give his work a clear, obvious and more or less crude pattern if he was to fix and hold his "unlettered audience". He had to underline rhetorical effect. He had to conceive style as primarily a technique—"tricks"—and not as personal expression or the fruit of "inspiration". He had no idea of being a "rare and favoured person upon whom divine inspiration had descended"—Dr. Chaytor's idea, it seems, of the typical post-Renaissance poet—he made poems scientifically, to order, on purpose. Here Dante is quoted, but not very aptly; for Dante certainly thought that he and all *magni poetae* were somehow divinely inspired, though he also laid great stress on technique, as in the text quoted by Dr. Chaytor. His emphasis was two-fold; Dr. Chaytor for his own purpose—and, in a sense, legitimately—has stressed only one of these emphases; but he might have told us of the other.

From this rhetorical bias, then, come the crude simplicities (repetitions, formulae, clichés) of medieval verse; and from the same bias come its super-subtle obscurities—according to the ways, contrasted and opposed, in which the poet faced a public that heard him rather than read him. If the argument seems to waver a little at this stage it suffices, no doubt, to prove Dr. Chaytor's case up to a point, though this point would be hard to determine exactly. The next chapter carries the discussion into the sphere of "prose and translation", but in a less challenging way. Finally there is a learned section on "publication and circulation".

Granted a measure of truth to all this, how far does it truly represent the literature of Europe between, say, Boethius and Chauature must be! Indeed, it does seem to depress Dr. Chaytor; his tone is nearly always, I think, faintly sardonic. But granted his right to feel superior has he the right to call his book "An Introduction to Medieval Literature"? An Introduction in some sense it certainly is; but not in the usual sense. Hence its misleading character, which I venture to indicate broadly in two ways.

1. Dr. Chaytor is a specialist (on the Troubadours and Early French) and looks at the Middle Ages with the intense but narrow gaze of a specialist. A certain exaggeration sometimes obviously mars his judgment and can be felt indeed everywhere in his book, though it could not, without tiresomeness, be exposed or conveyed with detailed examples. True, his special time-context is 1000 to 1300 for the study of which, as he says, French literature must be taken as a "point of departure". But the point of departure for the study of French is itself Latin; and it is the Latin background that we miss. Where is the great line of Latin prose? St. Augustine is mentioned once—in a footnote—Boethius never; Abelard once; St. Bonaventure never. No representative scholastic is examined *as a prose-writer.* Yet surely a main quality of medieval writing, that of clarity of conception and statement which has little to do with "tricks" and nothing to do with talking down to "unlettered" audiences and is manifest in Dante, cannot be tasted or treated apart from its Latin and scholastic background. Mr. Eliot has pointed this out,(2) one had though sufficiently.

Again, Dr. Chaytor simply ignores the Latin hymns. Are they not relevant to medieval "style"? And in particular is it not relevant to his thesis that these poems, at least, were not written for recitation either to the unlettered aristocracy who enjoyed the epics or to the precious folk who enjoyed or pretended to enjoy the *trobar clus*, but for singing in Church? Should not their various "styles" have been considered—to say nothing of their influence on the Latin love-lyric?

Again, Dr. Chaytor practically ignores the *dòlce stil novo.* Guinizelli and Cavalcanti—Dante's acknowledged masters in Italian versification—are never once mentioned. The former's *Al cor gentil*, a text of capital importance in literary history, is of the mid 13th century, and already it is hard to trace in it any special connexion with vocal delivery.

2. But this book has a defect deeper than onesidedness in the choice of evidence. Its range of thought is narrow. To be sure the

(2) In his *Dante* reprinted in the volume of, *Selected Essays.*

medieval writers were often childish, often insufferably artificial, often tediously obscure. And these faults are largely due, no doubt, to their dependence, natural in the pre-print age, on listeners rather than readers. But Dr. Chaytor seems to have noticed hardly anything else in them; he seems to see in them only, or very nearly only, the kind of simplicity and obscurity which can be explained typographically. But this is dangerously to simplify the *data;* and even in the abstract there are diversities of simplicity and obscurity of which Dr. Chaytor seems to have no idea. His critical theory is defective because his terms are not subtly enough understood; hence his handling of the facts themselves is not nearly supple enough. The qualities he talks about are more complicated than he seems to suppose, and so are the writers who exemplify these qualities.

There are at least two ways of writing simply and at least three of writing obscurely. We know in general what Dr. Chaytor is bored by in medieval writing; its simplicities (obviousness, repetitions, naiveties, clichés, etc.); its artificiality (the deliberate obscurities of the *trobar clus*, for instance, and the rhetorical pedantry of the *trobar ric*—of Arnaut Daniel, we are reminded, and even of Dante when he followed this master). But we know also what Dr. Chaytor considers a 'good' simplicity and a 'good' complexity. The simplicity he admires consists in "following one's own inspiration". This Dante does when he "forgets the rules", and so writes well enough to satisfy J. A. Symonds (p. 78). But suppose there is a difference between "forgetting the rules" and transcending them? Is Dante only a great poet by accident, and then only when he is accidentally "modern"? The question is perhaps meaningless as it stands, but the fault is Dr. Chaytor's. He should explain what he means by "forgetting the rules" before he chides Dante for obeying them.

Again, the complexity he admires is exemplified in Virgil, whose "delicate art" is commended as being "in some respects . . . remarkably modern"—adapted as it is to reading not to recitation, whereas his wretched 12th century paraphraser is at the mercy of his audience.

Behind these judgments lies a view of poetry which values especially (a) "the expression of one thought . . . which comes unbidden from the heart and is clothed in words of simple and unrestrained emotion"; this is the true *simple style*, proper to the lyric: and (b) an interweaving of '*mots evocateurs*' which "intensify a picture by provoking associated ideas". This is the true complex style, proper to non-lyrical verse; and it seems to amount to nothing more than organic richness of imagery. Now one would hesitate before quarrelling with this view were it not taken by Dr. Chaytor in a way that ignores certain qualities not alien to great poetry and not lacking in medieval prose or verse; qualities indeed which are rather characteristic of the best of this prose and verse. There is a simplicity that is a habit of mind and that one does not like to confuse with what "comes unbidden from the heart" or with "words of unrestrained emotion". Even the unbidden lyric moment may be found here and there in our period, though Dr. Chaytor, with his troubadour bias, does not tell us where to look for it—and this seems the place to remark that St. Bernard's name does not occur in this book. But the simplicity I call a habit of mind, which I venture to suggest is on the whole more characteristic of the pre-Renaissance than of the post-Renaissance mind, is in and of the intellect. It appears, of course, in St. Thomas; but in this respect he is not "before his time". It is akin to that directness of speech which Mr. Eliot notes as common to Dante, Villon and Chaucer, but it lies deeper than speech. It has to do, perhaps, with the spiritual discipline that affected more or less the whole of a society educated by, and largely for, the Church. It may even have been partly due to that age's very freedom from print, from the habit of indiscriminate reading, 'skimming' and browsing. Whatever it was, however, it does not seem to have been remarked by Dr. Chaytor. Not for him is the simplicity of the age before print an ease in going straight to the object, conjoined, in the greatest writers, with a grand simplicity of style. It is only a naivety and a subordination to uncouth audiences, and it issues only in a silly simplicity of style. To this extent he misrepresents medieval literature as a whole, however reliable he may be over parts of it.

Similar objections are suggested by his treatment of the medieval obscurities, though the intricacy of this subject makes one very loth to meddle with it, especially in face of Dr. Chaytor's immense reading in the obscure poets of the *lingua d'oc*. This, at least, may be said, however, without too great audacity, that if the *trobar clus* was sometimes a poets' affectation ("to hide his meaning from the vulgar herd"), and if the *trobar ric* was often a mere adornment of "the commonest of commonplaces", and if such affectation and stylisation infected much medieval writing outside the circle of the troubadours (so that even Dante was tainted) it does not follow that anything like all that we find obscure or artificial in that writing is affectation or hollow rhetoric. Obscurity, as Dante warns us in self-defence, but as Dr. Chaytor inadequately acknowledges, may, and often did, come from the compressed or figurative expression of real thinking. Of such obscurity—of *thought* rather than of *word*, to use Mr. Eliot's pregnant distinction—the *Paradiso* is full, or, a less obvious example, that poem on Poverty by Jacopone da Todi, which Mr. Shewring translated for BLACKFRIARS recently. As for artificiality, in verse a high degree of this may occur when a poet uses a difficult, highly-wrought medium in the effort to express a great emotional strain—as in that extraordinary poem, "*Io son venuto*", of which Mr. D. A. Traversi has made a brief but detailed analysis which is worth recalling.(3) Emotion need not be rendered by an expression which "comes unbidden from the heart". But to see what a sensitive and sympathetic analysis can discern in Dante, even when he is following so rhetorical a master as Arnaut Daniel I must refer Dr. Chaytor to Mr. Traversi's essay.

Enough has been said to suggest misgivings about Dr. Chaytor as a literary critic. And such misgivings affect our estimate of his whole thesis; not that there is need to counteract the underestimate of medieval literature as a whole which accompanies this statement of it. That literature is what it is, in great part, by being of the pre-print age; but it is not *characterised*—at least not to the extent suggested—by the defects that are here adduced as evidence.

On Dante's behalf I should like to add that he did not write the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* to "vindicate his native tongue" but in order to define the *volgare illustre* and to illustrate the use of it; that there is no evidence that he considered the *terza rima* a complicated stanza (it is a fairly simple one) and so "a safeguard against mishandling"; that he did not consider Love "the highest possible subject" for a poet; that he was not exiled from Florence because of an "enthusiasm for the Empire and . . . a world State" (this showed itself later). With regard to his and other medievals' views on "inspiration" more might be said about Dr. Chaytor's way with the texts he adduces; but time presses. With regard to medieval homiletics it is rather invidious to give Wyclif and Roger Bacon credit for protesting against rhetorical ornament and demanding "a plain simple style suited to . . . simple folk" without a word about the repeated efforts or more orthodox or more representative Churchmen(4) in the same direction. Finally, can *cujus regio ejus religio* be fairly called a "medieval maxim"? If it is such then erastianism is as "medieval" as the Catholic principle that all kingdoms, however distinct as kingdoms, should profess the same Faith.

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(3) In *Italian Studies*, 1938. No. 6.

(4) For example Humbert of Romans in his *De Eruditione Praedicatorum*, especially the 2nd *Pars* (*Opera de Vita Regulari*, Vol. II. Ed. Berthier).