

DIVERSA

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L'AVÈNEMENT DE L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU EN EUROPE*

Thus far, seven other collaborative works – four on aspects of Modernism, two on the late eighteenth century and Romanticism, and one on writing in European languages in Sub-Saharan Africa – have appeared within the framework of the *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, the ambitious project under the aegis of the International Comparative Literature Association. The present work is the initial volume of four which will be dedicated to the unfolding of the Renaissance. Impressive in its scope and detail, *L'avènement de l'esprit nouveau* reflects the new breadth of scholarly vision that informs the best efforts in comparative studies today. Besides separate bibliographies for each chapter, there is a general bibliography subdivided by major thematic categories and additionally by geocultural territories and nations. An index of names facilitates cross-reference. In their approach to the task of describing the characteristic patterns of Renaissance literary life, the editors seem imbued with the example of the great historian of civilization Fernand Braudel. By deploying a diverse group of experts in forty-four chapters gathered under nine main divisions, they set the stage at a deliberate and stately tempo. Not accidentally, the resulting picture of the decades leading to the *anni mirabiles* of the 1490s resembles less a monodic narration than a mosaic of coextensive moments.

* *L'époque de la Renaissance 1400–1600*, I.: *L'avènement de l'esprit nouveau 1400–1480*, edited by Tibor Klaniczay, Eva Kushner, and André Stegmann. (*Histoire comparée des littératures de langues européennes*, vol. 7) Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988. 594 pages.

Their purpose is to avoid reading superficial resemblances onto the actual diversity of cultural development across Europe, and to acknowledge both continuities and disjunctures. By their choice of chapters, the editors emphasize the fuller context in which humanism arose as the key energizing force that eventually radiated into all areas of thought and creation. Instead of devoting separate compartments to the salient thinkers and artists, they place them, wherever it is appropriate to do so, alongside other figures, types, and social groupings under a variety of topics. The story of historical, regional, and national factors and of thematic and generic relationships is thereby depersonalized. It is no contradiction that the volume's final, and one of its most brilliant, chapters, Klaniczay's "Le culte humaniste des grands personnages," pays due attention to the "reinvention" of the individual protagonist of culture as part of our Renaissance heritage. The lesson clearly is that, although-and-because we are heirs of humanism, we should and can look with reasonable scholarly distance at our own cultural roots.

L'avènement de l'esprit nouveau does not shy away from the social, political, and intellectual history of the waning Middle Ages. Quite the opposite. The first division, "Les mutations politiques," deals with Europe around 1400 (papacy, Holy Roman Empire, feudalism, occidental monarchies, the Byzantine and Ottoman empires, eastern monarchies), with revolts and dissenting movements, with new networks of diplomacy, and with the rise of nationalisms. The second division, "L'univers de la nouvelle civilisation," deals with banking and commerce in incipient capitalism, city life across Europe, the penetration into and knowledge of the world outside Europe, and the movement from astrology to astronomy as a harbinger of scientific innovation. The third division, "Les supports de la nouvelle culture," explores the intensified cultivation of Latin and new turning to Greek, the role of humanist libraries, the cultural impact of printing, and educational institutions and trends, such as the schools of the Brethren of the Common Life. This investigation of foundations in a broad-gauged Braudelian

fashioned establishes a grand preface without being marred by those extravagant patches of jargon which sometimes disfigure "new historical" approaches to the same background. (It would be invidious to name here, in contrast, examples of pseudo-comparatists who believe the ringing slogans of ideological rhetoric can substitute for substantive evidence and genuine cross-cultural knowledge.) The cosmopolitan team directed by Klaniczay, Kushner, and Stegmann does not appear to have sacrificed anything in analytical power by expressing their insights in a "classical" idiom accessible not just to European but also to non-European students who seek guidance in the complexities of an entire civilization.

This reaching across disciplinary boundaries and gathering together of insights from many fields of investigation is only one of the strengths. By also reaching beyond the habitual geocultural boundaries of the preponderant mass of scholarship in Western Europe and North America, the present volume asserts the kind of awareness that Comparative Literature is especially called to develop. True: Italy still receives the lion's share of interest due to it as the main pace-setter of the Renaissance, and France figures prominently. However, Britain and the German lands are apportioned no more attention than the Lowlands enjoy; Spain and Portugal, no more than Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland. Croatia, Dalmatia, Romania, the Baltic littoral, the Scandinavian nations, and Russia may be treated in a more peripheral fashion, but it is refreshing that they are not overlooked.

The next six divisions take up several challenging tasks. They examine forces underlying the Reformation, take up currents and ideas central to humanism proper, enter into the revolution in the arts and in learning, and allow us to witness the novelties of the age against the backdrop of enduring medieval forms. The ensemble has an appealing range that brings to mind the Bakhtinian notion of the remarkable cultural polyphony of the overlapping Middle Ages and Renaissance that still reverberates in Rabelais. The subtitle of the volume is

more explicit in the general theme of the fourth division, "Le nouvel esprit humaniste," which surveys the new philological passion marking the humanist type, the redirection of the human sciences and redefinition of civil and humane virtues, the commingling of older currents and the seminal teachings of Ficino, Pico, et al., and the natural symbiosis between humanist belief in language and the rhetorical tradition. The fifth division, "Le renouveau spirituel," considers the coextensive factors promoting the possibility of the Reformation: the spread of attachment to the Bible, mystical and heretical currents, the flow of the *Devotio Moderna* down the Rhine and of the Hussite movement out of Bohemia, the activity of Councils to cope with dissention, and a variety of calls for and partial attempts at reform. The fascinating pre-Renaissance genius Cusanus figures here as in many other parts of the volume.

The sixth division lives up to its name, "La révolution artistique", without blurring distinctions through overzealousness to prove some elusive unitary hypothesis. The dual artistic and scientific importance of the rediscovery of perspective is examined in several relations — to painting, architecture, cosmology, and moral and historical awareness. The qualities of Flemish and Italian painting and of avant-garde sculpture at the waning of Gothic style, and the consequences of Neoplatonism in the arts, receive special attention. A separate chapter is devoted to the final phase of Gothic architecture, the inroads of the new theory of space and Neoplatonic sensibility, the early passion for classically inspired urban renewal in Italy, and the wave of building influenced by Italy. By contrast, the Gothic spirit is shown to persist in music across most of Europe right to the threshold of the star years of the Renaissance. (An interesting later case would be the "retardation" evident in the flourishing of Baroque music around the 1730s, out of phase with the other arts.)

The seventh division, "Diffusion et réfraction du savoir," is a loose conglomeration of areas that frequently are neglected or relegated to separate treatment. It opens with an excellent

chapters on the intense activity of creating encyclopedias in the fifteenth century, their principles of organization, and the appearance of humanistic tendencies (e.g., syncretism). The separate chapter on factors affecting the evolution of traditional historiography, that on the genres and publics of religious vernacular literature, and that on the modes of didactic and moralizing literature give rich detail about regional particularities across Europe. Kushner's closing chapter on satire has an effective double approach: on the one hand, she develops a structured exposition on the functions, themes, and generic domains of satire in the fifteenth century (poetry, prose, theater, narrative), before characterizing humanist satire proper; on the other hand, simultaneously, she selects examples across Europe that underscore the connection to regional reality. This section of the book lends a special scholarly dimension that helps to remind us again that, when we pick out and highlight only those traits which are specifically humanist, and/or disregard cultural specificity from place to place, we are choosing to make our literary history itself into a neoclassical narrative form.

The eighth division, "L'héritage littéraire médiéval: persistance et mutations," too, drives home that general point by demonstrating how certain of the favorite medieval forms affected much of the finest imaginative writing of the Renaissance. A chapter on the continuation of chivalric literature, the tenacious life of the Arthurian and Carolingian repertoires, and the social delight in festivals, contests, and orders demonstrates as well how an ideal of courtesy and valor could coexist into the Renaissance proper alongside erudite classical humanism. A special chapter deals with the fundamental stability of epic writing which survived the Middle Ages in prose and flourished because of printing, thus penetrating into the consciousness of the burgher audience. While the uses to which the epic could be turned as a vehicle to promote royal or ecclesiastical interests are well illustrated, the writing of artificial epics (e.g., those glorifying Maximilian I) and the roots

of the later educational romance would be additional topics. With a fascinating range of cases from Spain to Russia, the next chapter amplifies by examining popular heroic poems and ballads marked by the folk imagination. A superior chapter on the varied fortunes of the tradition of courtly love takes us back into sophisticated strata of poetry. Included in its purview are the crisis of the conventions, and their use as vehicles of criticism of philosophy (notably in urbane France), religious contrafacture, Dantesque and Petrarchan influences in Iberia, the Chaucerian heritage in England, and the evolution of mastersong out of minnesang. There follows a treatment of story and novella forms — both in prose and verse — across Europe and of their cross-fertilization through translations; emphasized is the role of major collections (e.g., the *Novellino*) and authors (e.g., Ruiz, Chaucer, Boccaccio) in establishing, as an alternative and parallel to Latin, viable vernacular languages to serve the new bourgeois civilization.

The ninth division, “Essor de la littérature savante,” serves to link the special role of Italy as the cradle of humanism to the foregoing story of the literary variegation of actual Europe, and to bridge to future volumes in which repercussions of the Italian development will appear in guises suites to that diversity. In a sense, by inversion, we can regard the entire first volume as a grandiose preface by means of which we are enabled to focus in with greater appreciation on the historical “miracle” of the fusion of forces that produced the glorious Italian experience. We start with a review of the build-up momentum for the shaping of a great modern idiom and the exemplary status of such in the triple heritage of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. We proceed to consider the humanist zeal — the example again first set by the Italians — for translating and editing the classics, and the seminal importance of making the Greek available in Latin as a gateway into the vernacular. The rebirth of a high poetry in Latin cultivated by the Italian humanists, the first attempts to revive classical theater in Latin, the humanist theory and practice of writing history, and the

already mentioned humanist cult of great personalities occupy four independent chapters, fully justified by the seminal importance of these developments for all of Europe. All in all, these final chapters set forth with exceptional clarity the combination of creative happenings and the structure of new values — such as the adulation of erudition — that characterized the vibrant situation of the ending fifteenth century.

When specialists look into this volume, it is probable that here and there they may regret the resistance by the contributors to expansion upon particular great works of figures, or grumble over omissions in connection with particular forms, themes, and trends. A more serious complaint may be that, by cutting the volume at the threshold of the starburst of the Renaissance, rather than showing additionally some salient features of the overlay of at least the first two Renaissance generations, the editors create a truncated view of the Italian cultural “revolution” as it affects Europe. In some senses, we can claim the volume is not about the Renaissance, but about the waning Middle Ages; if it corrects the vulgar tradition of a triumphant humanism by showing that the Renaissance did not simply displace most medieval ways, it stacks the deck somewhat by cutting off before reporting on the rapid diffusion of primary Renaissance impulses into Northern Europe by 1500. But the reviewer wants to stipulate that such cavils are unfair, since the editors have openly embraced (in a preview in their Introduction) the principle of recapitulation in their work in order to implement this other crucial kind of panoramic coverage. Volume II, *La nouvelle culture*, will restart from 1480 and carry to 1520. Indeed, their exposition of the plans for the subsequent volumes makes inspiring reading, and all scholars of the Renaissance will be well advised to consult the brilliantly condensed presentation of what they hope to do in completing their subseries. The introduction to Volume I offers a model overview of the dynamics and complexity of European culture over two full centuries and sets a high standard which comparative scholarship will applaud.