

**THE RENAISSANCE, AN
ESSAY READ IN
THE THEATRE,
OXFORD, JUNE 17, 1863**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649331956

The Renaissance, an essay read in the theatre, Oxford, June 17, 1863 by John Addington Symonds

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JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

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THE RENAISSANCE.

AN ESSAY

READ

IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 17, 1863,

BY

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FELLOW OF MAGDALEN COLLEGE.

Le Temps revient.

OXFORD
HENRY HAMMANS
1863

SYLLABUS.

- I. Introduction on the difficulty attending any enquiry into great internal changes in History.
Application to the Renaissance.
- II. Sketch of ages prior to the Renaissance, and of the signs of its coming which they exhibited.
- III. Revival of Art.
- IV. Revival of Letters: 3 periods marked.
- V. Influence of this period on
 - (a) The Arts: Painting, Architecture, Sculpture, Music.
 - (β) Literature.
 - (γ) Philosophy.
 - (δ) Physical Sciences.
- VI. Wider influence on
 - (a) Society.
 - (β) The Church.
- VII. Conclusion.

THE RENAISSANCE.

The world's great age begins anew,
The golden years return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn;
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

The last Chorus from Shelley's 'Hellas,' Stanza I.

I.

To fix the exact date of any great internal change in the history of the world or of a nation is almost impossible. Nor is it easy to refer all the phenomena of such a period to some one definite cause. Long before the appearance of that principle which is to change the face of things, there have been silent agencies at work, abortive efforts have been made, and prophecies been uttered, all tending to facilitate the birth that is to be. And even when it has become clear that some fresh power is at work, leavening the minds of men and altering the circumstances that surround them, its operation is manifested very variously, and at widely distant periods, upon the different spheres of human activity. Indeed it is not untrue to say that in this respect the growth of nations resembles that of individuals. For while in both the entire nature

seems to be developed as a whole by some internal and inscrutable process, in both certain faculties are more prominent at certain stages of the growth. Thus the imagination precedes reflection in man; and in nations we find that Mythology has ceased to exist, and that Art and Poetry are full grown, before Philosophy begins to show itself. Therefore in examining any crisis in the history of the human race, we must not be surprised to find that the emotional elements are the first to exhibit distinct tendencies, and to assume a definite form. They first obey those new laws, which in course of time will determine the growth of the reflective faculties; and thus their premature development in Art and Poetry appears to anticipate and prefigure the future order of the world. But meantime Thought and Reason lag behind. Their laws, it is true, are essentially the same as those which govern Art; and they are stimulated by the same external circumstances. But it needs a longer time to mature their power and to render them susceptible of these influences. Therefore when they have arrived at perfection, they appear to manifest tendencies directly antagonistic to those of Art, which has in the meantime allied itself to much that Reason must destroy. Thence ensues a struggle parallel to that which is carried on between the intellect and the emotions in a fullgrown man. The student of Greek history will easily apply these remarks to the successive phases of development through which the Hellenic mind attained maturity. Throughout, he will observe one ruling principle of æsthetical perfection; but he will notice that this principle was first embodied in legends, in architecture, and in sculpture; and that when it reached the sphere of speculation, its work was in a great measure subversive of what had gone before. Philosophy destroyed the religious fictions of a previous age, but it constructed its own intellectual theories in obedience to the same spirit that animated what it had destroyed.

Again, such examinations are further complicated by the fact that all notable impulses communicated to human progress have been connected with new combinations and interactions of alien races. Thus not only have we to explain the secret and invisible process of natural growth which all society must undergo, but also to arrest and analyse that electric light of fresh intelligence which flashes from the contact of two nations different in their origin and language and religion. Each brings to the other arts and acquisitions of experience hitherto unknown. Each explains half-solved riddles in the other's thought, and elicits discoveries that had previously lain dormant. Each learns toleration, and finds the world greater and itself smaller than it had deemed before. It need hardly be remarked that it is only at certain stages of development that this influence is powerful, and that more than one nation seldom profits by the contact. Thus it generally happens that a younger and more vigorous race receives from an elder and more civilised the arts and sciences which have hitherto existed in a rudimentary state, but which it is destined to carry to perfection. So in the progress of the world nothing is lost; for one people completes the work which another had begun. This position, if it required such support, we might illustrate by another reference to the history of the Greeks. Their wonderful activity was stimulated in the first instance by contact with Egypt and the East, whence they derived the simplest arts of life, and learned the use of letters and of numbers. Again, the exploits of Alexander, by bringing the East and West alike beneath the Greek dominion, diffused the spirit of Hellenic civilisation, and paved the way for that universal sovereignty which it was left for Rome to achieve. Thence ensued the social and religious peculiarities which mark the later Greek and Roman history, when all the intellectual refinements of the conquered races were concentrated in the capital of the world. Lastly, it was the mixture of

nations at Alexandria, of Greek and Jew and Roman and Oriental, that aided the increase of Christianity, and made men understand its principles of universal brotherhood.

Another difficulty besets this kind of historical enquiry; and that is the influence of great men upon the inevitable and internal changes, out of which at one time they seem to spring, and which at another appear to be originated by them. How far are we to say that a Socrates, or a Luther, or a Giotto, was the product or the plastic spirit of his age? Perhaps in this case we may follow Hegel, and endeavour to make the heroes of the world typical of the times they lived in, carrying the spirit of progress in their own persons beyond the pillars of Hercules, but doing so because the fulness of the times is come, and because in them is centred and made manifest a tendency common to their age.

These remarks, if generally true, may be applied with special significance to the age of the Renaissance—that mighty period of dissolution and reconstruction, of the reabsorption of old material, and of the development of new principles, of discoveries and inventions mutually strengthening one another, and tending to diffuse and render permanent the power of man. If we ask, What was the Renaissance? the lovers of art will answer that it was the change produced on painting, architecture, and sculpture, by the study of newly recovered antiques; nor will they agree about the value of this change; for some deplore it as the decadence of true inspiration, others hail it as the dawning of a brief but glorious day. The Scholar means by the Renaissance that discovery of ancient MSS. and that progress in philology which led to a correct knowledge of classical literature, to new systems of philosophy, to a fresh taste in poetry, to a deeper insight into language, and, finally, to the great Lutheran schism and the emancipation of modern thought. The Jurist understands by the term a dissolution of old systems of