

Preface to the First English Edition

HISTORY has always been far more engrossed by problems of origins than by those of decline and fall. When studying any period, we are always looking for the promise of what the next is to bring. Ever since Herodotus, and earlier still, the questions imposing themselves upon the mind have been concerned with the rise of families, nations, kingdoms, social forms, or ideas. So, in medieval history, we have been searching so diligently for the origins of modern culture, that at times it would seem as though what we call the Middle Ages had been little more than the prelude to the Renaissance.

But in history, as in nature, birth and death are equally balanced. The decay of overripe forms of civilization is as suggestive a spectacle as the growth of new ones. And it occasionally happens that a period in which one had, hitherto, been mainly looking for the coming to birth of new things, suddenly reveals itself as an epoch of fading and decay.

The present work deals with the history of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries regarded as a period of termination, as the close of the Middle Ages. Such a view of them presented itself to the author of this volume, whilst endeavouring to arrive at a genuine understanding of the art of the brothers van Eyck and their contemporaries, that is to say, to grasp its meaning by seeing it in connexion with the entire life of their times. Now the common feature of the various manifestations of civilization of that epoch proved to be inherent rather in that which links them to the past than in the germs which they contain of the future. The significance, not of the artists alone, but also of theologians, poets, chroniclers, princes, and statesmen, could be best appreciated by considering them, not as the harbingers of a coming culture, but as perfecting and concluding the old.

This English edition is not a simple translation of the original Dutch (first edition 1919, second 1921), but the result of a work of adaptation, reduction, and consolidation under the author's directions. The references, here left out, may be found in full in the original.

Verse quotations are given in the original French throughout the work. In order to avoid an undue increase in length, quotations in prose are, as a rule, given in translations only, except in the concluding chapters where the literary expression as such is discussed, and the actual language becomes important. Here the old French prose also is set out in full.

The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to Sir J. Rennell Rodd, whose kind interest in the book gave rise to this edition, and to the translator, Mr F. Hopman, of Leiden, whose clear insight into the exigencies of translation rendered the recasting possible, and whose endless patience with the wishes of an exacting author made the difficult task a work of friendly cooperation.

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J. H.