

Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*

In reflecting upon the problems of historical periodization, I am struck first and foremost by the sense that periodization, while a useful shorthand for facilitating discussion within the discipline of history, is a bit like trying to force a round peg into a square hole. At its best, periodization can give one a good sense of the ebb and flow of the ages of history by defining the central characteristics not only of an age, but of certain historical moments taking place within the lifespan of that age. Nonetheless, if periodization is overly relied upon (as Huizinga does in his *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*), it is easy to misinterpret the events of an era by constantly examining them through the lens of the discourse surrounding that age. By doing so, not only are certain historical events contextually misunderstood, but some events which support the themes of their period are privileged over others which do not fit into these external, structural discourses.

The Middle Ages is not primarily defined based upon events which occurred during that time, but is rather invented as a period of transition between the glory of the ancient civilizations and the renewed vitality of Renaissance. Howard Kaminsky points out in “The Burden of the Later Middle Ages” that the term ‘medieval’ itself was created by Humanists to articulate what they considered the unfortunate millennium separating them from the Classical period. Randolph Starn writes in “The Early Modern Muddle” that the Early Modern was created as a period to span the gap between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modernity. However, historians can forever create new terms which define the gap between successively smaller historical periods and make possible a teleological definition of their own age, but these definitions will never be intrinsic to the period under consideration itself. Furthermore, such definitions could not possibly be meaningful to the people who lived during these ages whose experiences we are trying to empathize with. Of what significance to a 12<sup>th</sup> century Burgundian would have been the term Middle Ages, inasmuch as it is defined in relation to a Modern Age which has not yet occurred? Just as every age views itself as ‘modern’, Starn reminds us that every age is also fundamentally being pulled between old and new.

Jack Goldstone elaborates upon the problems of periodization by presenting the various characteristics which historians use to delineate the Early Modern and pointing out that none of them are meaningful on a global scale. Goldstone argues that the Early Modern is defined based on functionalist sociological theory to occupy the gap between feudal and modern economies and that because feudal economies did not even exist outside of Europe (excluding Japan), the term is meaningless outside of the context of a Marxist conception of European history.

Despite these rather sticky problems raised by the periodization of the “Late Medieval” and “Early Modern,” Huizinga discusses the decline of the Middle Ages unselfconsciously. Rather than examining the cultural and political worlds of the late Medieval and using historical events to formulate an understanding of the spirit of the age, Huizinga rather takes as his point of departure the assumption that the decline of the Middle Ages was marked by decadence and crisis and uses this idea to frame all aspects of European society at the time. His approach inevitably leads to a moral judgment on the quality of Medieval art, chivalry, religion, and politics, all of which suffer under his scrutiny. He describes the late Medieval using what David Gary Shaw refers to in his

critique of *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* as a ‘rhetoric of excess and decline.’ In Huizinga’s first chapter, he claims that the Medieval mind was marked by a ‘passionate intensity’ and that the Medieval heart was ‘extravagan[t] and inflammab[le].’ Far from supporting this assertion with empirical evidence (which would be impossible), Huizinga makes this claim because it fits with an idea of the dramatic swings of an era in its death throes.

When Huizinga later describes the rich specificity of Medieval art and literature, he writes that the Medieval mind was primarily visual in nature because of the ‘atrophy of the mind’ which occurred at the end of the Middle Ages, a claim which certainly cannot be corroborated and for which he provides no evidence. In considering the elaboration of detail and careful realism of late Medieval art, which Huizinga says does not yet express the spirit of the Renaissance, I was first reminded of the *wunderkammern* popular in Renaissance Europe which sought, list-like, to contain ‘whatsoever singularity, chance and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever Nature has wrought in things that want life and may be kept...’ (Francis Bacon, *Gesta Grayorum*). While the cabinets of wonder were certainly inspired by the large number of new artifacts which appeared in Europe during the Age of Exploration, it is hard not to see in the list-like depictions of natural beauty of Medieval art the roots of an Enlightenment fervor to collect the wonders of the world. Counterexamples such as this one complicate Huizinga’s argument that the late Middle Ages adopted the forms of Humanism without ever being infused with its spirit. Though Huizinga closes *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* by writing that the Renaissance only arose when the ‘tone of life’ of the Middle Ages changed, he accepts this fact as an inevitability of the cyclical nature of historical periods, without ever suggesting what forces internal to the late Middle Ages brought about its eventual demise.