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Travels in Hyperreality

Translated by William Weaver

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Dreaming
of the
Middle Ages

Are there any connections between the Heroic Fantasy of Frank Frazetta, the new satanism, Excalibur, the Avalon sagas, and Jacques Le Goff? If they met aboard some unidentified flying object near Montailou, would Darth Vader, Jacques Fournier, and Parsifal speak the same language? If so, would it be a galactic pidgin or the Latin of the Gospel according to St. Luke Skywalker?

Indeed, it seems that people like the Middle Ages. A few minutes in an American bookstore allow you to discover many interesting specimens of this neomedieval wave. Let me quote only a few titles of paperbacks you find in the course of a nonsystematic browse: *A World Called Camelot*, *The Return of the King*, *The Sword Is Forged*, *The Lure of the Basilisk*, *Dragonquest*, *Dragonflight*, *The Dome in the Forest*, *The Last Defender of Camelot*, *The Dragon Hoard*, *Dr. Who and the Crusaders*, *Magic Quest*, *Camber the Heretic*, plus scattered items ranging from Celtic sagas, witchcraft, enchanted castles, and haunted dungeons to swords in the stone, unicorns, and explicitly neomedieval space operas.

If one does not trust "literature," one should at least trust

pop culture. In a drugstore recently I picked up, at random, a series of comic books offering the following smorgasbord: *Conan the King*, *The Savage Sword of Conan the Barbarian*, *Camelot 3000*, *The Sword and the Atom* (these last two displaying a complex intertwining of Dark Ages and laser beams), *The Elektra Saga*, *Crystar the Crystal Warrior*, *Elric of Melibone*. . . .

I could go on. But there is no special reason for amazement at the avalanche of pseudo-medieval pulp in paperbacks, midway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism. A country able to produce Dianetics can do a lot in terms of wash-and-wear sorcery and Holy Grail frappé. It would be small wonder if the next porn hit stars Marilyn Chambers as La Princesse Lointaine (if Americans have succeeded in transforming Rostand's *Chanteclair* into the *Fantastiks*, why not imagine the Princess of Tripoli offering the keys of her chastity belt to a bearded Burt Reynolds?). Not to mention such postmodern neomedieval Manhattan new castles as the Citicorp Center and Trump Tower, curious instances of a new feudalism, with their courts open to peasants and merchants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for the lords.

American cultivated masochism has abundantly agonized about such wonders as the Hearst Castle and the exterior of the Cloisters (the interior being more philologically inspired). But this is beside the point.

The chronicles of the New Middle Ages also tell of thousands of readers discovering Barbara Tuchman. The director of the Metropolitan Museum has decided to exhibit as "real" fakes all the forgeries that his public previously admired as the real thing, and the crowds queuing at the museum, a few years ago, for the exhibition of medieval Irish art are a clear symptom of a new taste.

America, having come to grips with 1776, is devouring the Real Past. Canned philology perhaps, but philology all the same. The Americans want and really like responsible historical reconstruction (perhaps because only after a text has been rigorously reconstructed can it be irresponsibly deconstructed). Like many

Europeans, many Americans also took the film *Excalibur* as the real Middle Ages; but many, many others are looking for something more real.

What's happening on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean? In Great Britain and France the nineteenth century was the age of the historical novel, of Walter Scott and Victor Hugo, and there is a fate which links the historical novel to medieval topics. This trend never died, and the shelves of every bookstore in London or Paris are full of interesting examples of medieval novels or romances. On the other hand, Italians have never scored remarkable achievements in this field. The relationship between Italian literature and the Middle Ages has always been unfortunate. Such names as Guerrazzi, Cantù, Grossi, and D'Azeglio sound unfamiliar to foreign ears, and rightly so. With perhaps the sole exception of D'Azeglio's *Ettore Fieramosca*, the medieval stuff produced in Italy during the last century was clumsy, boring, and bombastic. Our national novel of that time, Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, did not dog the footsteps of grand knights and emperors; it was set in the seventeenth century and told a story of oppressed peasants in a period of national frustration. Thus Italian critics have been surprised that during the last decade many Italian novels inspired by the Middle Ages have appeared, some of them winning an unexpectedly large audience. I will refrain from listing all the round tables and symposia that have recently been devoted to this problem, as the topic of "the return of the Middle Ages" has become obsessive. Other countries, even though they are more accustomed to this kind of revival, are also debating the same question, and we should try to provide some answer.

Thus we are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination. Undoubtedly what counts is the second aspect of the phenomenon, and one must wonder why Americans are more or less experiencing the same obsession as Europeans

and why both are devouring the reconstructions of Duby, Le Roy Ladurie, and Le Goff as if they were a new form of narrative. Who could have suspected, a decade ago, that people were ready to swallow the registers of a medieval parish in Poitou as if they were the chronicle of an Agatha Christie vicarage?

We are dreaming the Middle Ages, some say. But in fact both Americans and Europeans are inheritors of the Western legacy, and all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society. In the Middle Ages we witness the rise of modern armies, of the modern concept of the national state, as well as the idea of a supernatural federation (under the banner of a German Emperor elected by a Diet that functioned like an electoral convention); the struggle between the poor and the rich, the concept of heresy or ideological deviation, even our contemporary notion of love as a devastating unhappy happiness. I could add the conflict between church and state, trade unions (albeit in a corporative mode), the technological transformation of labor. At the beginning of the present millennium came the widespread introduction of windmills, there was the invention of horseshoes, of the shoulder harness for horses and oxen, of stirrups, and the modern type of rudder hinged to the stern below the surface of the water (without which invention the discovery of America would not have been possible). The compass came into use, and there was the final acceptance of Arab mathematics, hence the rise of modern ways of computing and double-entry bookkeeping. At the end of the era, if we agree that the era stops conventionally in 1492, came gunpowder and the Gutenberg galaxy.

We are still living under the banner of medieval technology. For instance, eyeglasses were a medieval invention, as important as the mechanical loom or the steam engine. At that time, an intellectual who became farsighted at the age of forty (bear in mind the difficulty of reading unreadable manuscripts by torchlight in

dark rooms beneath shadowy vaults) was unable to produce actively after the age of fifty. With the introduction of eyeglasses intellectual productivity increased enormously and the following centuries could better exploit these human resources.

None of the aforementioned ideas and realities was born in classical antiquity. From ancient Greece and Rome we acquired a certain idea of tragedy (but our theater is based on a medieval model) and an ideal of beauty, as well as our basic philosophical concepts. But from the Middle Ages we learned how to use them. The Middle Ages are the root of all our contemporary "hot" problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origin. All the questions debated during the sessions of the Common Market originate from the situation of medieval Europe.

Thus looking at the Middle Ages means looking at our infancy, in the same way that a doctor, to understand our present state of health, asks us about our childhood, or in the same way that the psychoanalyst, to understand our present neuroses, makes a careful investigation of the primal scene.

Our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for "reliable Middle Ages," not for romance and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and, moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of escapism à la Tolkien.

But is dreaming of the Middle Ages really a typical contemporary or postmodern temptation? If it is true—and it is—that the Middle Ages turned us into Western animals, it is equally true that people started dreaming of the Middle Ages from the very beginning of the modern era.

A Continuous Return

Modern ages have revisited the Middle Ages from the moment when, according to historical handbooks, they came to an end.

The modern era begins with some astounding achievements of the human spirit: the discovery of America, the liberation of Granada (with the consequent destruction of the Arab scientific legacy which would have anticipated the Renaissance and the rise of modern science), and the beginning of the second Diaspora with the exile of the Jews from Spain (pogroms were invented earlier, by the Crusaders; Western civilization has a complex pedigree).

Immediately after the official ending of the Middle Ages, Europe was ravaged by a pervasive medieval nostalgia. In Italy the great poets of the Renaissance, from Pulci to Boiardo and Ariosto, returned to the themes of the Knights saga. Teofilo Folengo wrote *Baldus*, a poem conceived in an incredible *latin de cuisine*; Torquato Tasso, the great poet of Italian Mannerism, celebrated the glories of the Crusaders. In Spain, Cervantes told the story of a man unable to reconcile the intrusion of reality with his love for medieval literature. Shakespeare borrowed and reshaped a lot from medieval narrative.

At the flowering of the English Renaissance John Dee or Robert Fludd rediscovered symbols and emblems of medieval Jewish mysticism. Even in the baroque period, when modern science seemed dominated by the new paradigms of Galileo or Newton, the Church of the Counter-Reformation worked silently to improve or to pollute the philosophy of the Schoolmen, while in France Mabillon rediscovered the treasuries of medieval manuscripts. As a semiotician I cannot forget that one of the most outstanding achievements in the theory of signs was due to an innovating follower of Aquinas, John of Saint Thomas or, as they call him now, Jean Poincot. During the Age of Reason, while the circle of the French *Encyclopédie* was seemingly fighting the final battle against the remnants of the Dark Ages, these Dark Ages started charming the aristocrats, with the Gothic novel and early Ossianic Romanticism. Geographically close, even though psychologically far from the Castle of Otranto, Ludovico Antonio Muratori collected in his *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* the ancient chronicles of

medieval grandeur. Soon Chateaubriand was to celebrate the rise of Gothic cathedrals under the trees of the Celtic forest, while thanks to Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, and the restorations of Viollet-le-Duc, the whole nineteenth century would dream of its own Middle Ages, thus avenging the enlightened gesture of Napoleon, who cut the tympanum of Notre Dame to allow his imperial cortège to enter the cathedral.

Oddly enough one could see, from the Confessional of the Black Penitents, Fulton's steamboat sailing triumphantly; and I do not exactly know whether the spinning jenny and the power loom were neo-Gothic machinery or whether the Nightmare Abbey of Gregory the Monk was a factory for the concoction of Gothic dreams. The Italian Risorgimento was a period of abundant medieval *repêchage*, not to mention Italian opera, full as it is of troubadours; and finally there was the German neomedieval vertigo of the castle of Ludwig of Bavaria and Wagner's parsifalization of the universe.

What would Ruskin, Morris, and the pre-Raphaelites have said if they had been told that the rediscovery of the Middle Ages would be the work of the twentieth-century mass media?

Classicism and Medievalism

At this point we must bring up at least two questions. First, what distinguishes this permanent rediscovery of the Middle Ages from the equally permanent return to the classical heritage? Second, did the many Middle Ages (too many) always fit the same archetype?

As for the first question, we can oppose the model of philological reconstruction to that of utilitarian bricolage.

In the case of the remains of classical antiquity we reconstruct them but, once we have rebuilt them, we don't dwell in them, we only contemplate them as an ideal model and a masterpiece of faithful restoration. On the contrary, the Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch: We have always mended or

patched them up, as something in which we still live. We have cobbled up the bank as well as the cathedral, the state as well as the church. We no longer dwell in the Parthenon, but we still walk or pray in the naves of the cathedral. Even when we live with Aristotle or Plato, we deal with them in the same terms suggested by our medieval ancestors. When one scrapes away the medieval incrustations from Aristotle and renews him, this reread Aristotle will adorn the shelves of academic libraries but will still not connect with our everyday life.

Since the Middle Ages have always been messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods, it was impossible for them to be always messed about in the same way. So I'll try to outline at least ten types of Middle Ages, to warn readers that every time one speaks of a dream of the Middle Ages, one should first ask which Middle Ages one is dreaming of.

Ten Little Middle Ages

1. The Middle Ages as a *pretext*. This is the Middle Ages of opera or of Torquato Tasso. There is no real interest in the historical background; the Middle Ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters. Under this heading we can include also the so-called cloak-and-dagger novels (or *les romans de cape et d'épée*). There is a difference between historical novels and cloak-and-dagger stuff. The former choose a particular historical period so as to gain a better understanding not only of that period but (through it) of our present time, seen as the end result of those remote historical events. The characters of the novel need not be "really historical" (that is, people who really existed); it is enough for them (albeit fictional) to be representative of their period. Lady Rowena and Pierre Bezukhov are inventions of novels, but they tell us something "true" about the English Middle Ages and about Russia at the time of Napoleon. On the contrary in the cloak-and-dagger novel the fic-

tional characters must move among "real" historical figures who will support their credibility. Think of Dumas and of the crucial narrative role played by such characters as Richelieu and Louis XIII. Notwithstanding the presence of "real" characters, the psychology of d'Artagnan has nothing to do with the psychology of his century, and he could have blustered through the same adventures during the French Revolution. Thus in historical novels fictional characters help one to understand the past (and the past is not taken as a pretext), while in cloak-and-dagger novels the past (taken as a pretext) helps one to enjoy the fictional characters.

2. The Middle Ages as the site of an *ironical revisitation*, in order to speculate about our infancy, of course, but also about the illusion of our senility. Ariosto and Cervantes revisit the Middle Ages in the same way that Sergio Leone and the other masters of the "spaghetti Western" revisit nineteenth-century America, as heroic fantasy, something already fashioned by the early Hollywood studios. In the same sense, Rabelais was playing upon his fantastically revisited Sorbonne, but he no longer believed in the Paris he was telling of, as the characters in Monty Python movies do not believe in the grotesque period they inhabit.

3. The Middle Ages as a *barbaric* age, a land of elementary and outlaw feelings. These are the Middle Ages of Frazetta's fantasies, but, at a different level of complexity and obsession, they are also the Middle Ages of early Bergman. The same elementary passions could exist equally on the Phoenician coasts or in the desert of Gilgamesh. These ages are Dark par excellence, and Wagner's *Ring* itself belongs to this dramatic sunset of reason. With only a slight distortion, one is asked to celebrate, on this earth of virile, brute force, the glories of a new Aryanism. It is a shaggy medievalism, and the shaggier its heroes, the more profoundly ideological its superficial naïveté.

4. The Middle Ages of *Romanticism*, with their stormy castles and their ghosts. Germane to the eastern cruelty of *Vatbek*, these Middle Ages return in some contemporary space-operas, where it

is enough to put computers in the dungeon to transform it into a starship.

5. The Middle Ages of the *philosophia perennis* or of neo-Thomism, which loom not only behind Maritain and the pastoral and dogmatic views of Pius XII or John Paul II but can also be perceived, as a transparent source of inspiration, behind many kinds of formal and logical thinking in contemporary secular philosophers. Recently, in my *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, I studied the medieval theory of definition as it was imposed by Porphyry's *Isagoge* and I showed to what extent it was affected by certain logical quirks. My purpose was to demonstrate how these quirks continue to affect many contemporary theories of meaning that, frequently without acknowledging it, are still in debt to the Porphyrian line of thought. In this sense, the perennial vigor of the Middle Ages is not derived necessarily from religious assumptions, and there is a lot of hidden medievalism in some speculative and systematic approaches of our time, such as structuralism.

6. The Middle Ages of *national identities*, so powerful again during the last century, when the medieval model was taken as a political utopia, a celebration of past grandeur, to be opposed to the miseries of national enslavement and foreign domination.

7. The Middle Ages of *Decadentism*. Think, obviously, of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, think of Ruskin, but think also of Huysmans' *À rebours* and of the ecstasies of Des Esseintes. The typical Italian version of this decadent Middle Ages is found in the neomedievalism of Giosuè Carducci and Gabriele D'Annunzio (though the former was not a fin-de-siècle decadent). At first an invention of intellectuals, it was then organically inserted into the project of nationalistic restoration and produced, in architecture and the visual arts, a lot of fakes, sometimes interesting and sometimes pathetic, in Italian cities.

8. The Middle Ages of *philological reconstruction*, which goes from Mabillon through Muratori up to the best of Gilson, to the rediscovery of the *Acta Danicorum Philosophorum* and to the *Annales* school. This philological attitude can be applied either to great

historical events or to the imperceptibility of underlying social and technological structures, and to the forms of everyday life. Fortunately in this case no one would speak of "medieval fashion." Not fully free from the curiosity of the mass media, these Middle Ages help us, nevertheless, to criticize all the other Middle Ages that at one time or another arouse our enthusiasm. These Middle Ages lack sublimity, thank God, and thus look more "human."

9. The Middle Ages of so-called *Tradition*, or of occult philosophy (or *la pensée sapientielle*), an eternal and rather eclectic ramshackle structure, swarming with Knights Templars, Rosicrucians, alchemists, Masonic initiates, neo-Kabbalists, drunk on reactionary poisons sipped from the Grail, ready to hail every neo-fascist Will to Power, eager to accept as a visual ersatz for their improbable visions all the paraphernalia of the Middle Ages number 3, mixing up René Guénon and Conan the Barbarian, Avalon and the Kingdom of Prester John. Antiscientific by definition, these Middle Ages keep going under the banner of the mystical weddings of the micro- with the macrocosm, and as a result they convince their adepts that everything is the same as anything else and that the whole world is born to convey, in any of its aspects and events, the same Message. Fortunately the message got lost, which makes its Quest fascinating for the happy few who stand proof-tight, philology-resistant, bravely ignorant of the Popperian call for the good habit of falsification. To synthesize the way of Traditional thought, let me mention two basic cognitive models, one epistemological and one logical, that the Traditional way of thinking usually, and irresponsibly, turns upside down: The model of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is reversed into *propter hoc ergo ante hoc*, and the logical model of the *modus ponens* is reversed into what I call *modus indisponens* (to translate this Latin-Italian pun let me call it the "upsetting mode"). A good instance of *propter hoc ergo ante hoc* is given by an argument that one can find in many of the most famous discourses about the *Pimander*: It is well known that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was written in the first centuries of the Christian era but the adepts of the Tradition firmly maintain (even after

the decisive demonstration of Casaubon) that it was written at the time of Moses or of Pythagoras and, in any case, before Plato. Now the argument runs as follows: Since the *Corpus Hermeticum* contains ideas that "later" circulated within the Platonic milieu, this proves that it was written before Plato. As for the *modus indisponeus*, it works (?) as follows:

If p then q, but k then w,

and can be exemplified by the following argument: "If a = b, then b = a." But the *Corpus Hermeticum* says that *sicut inferius sic superius*; therefore, the Holy Grail is none other than the *Lapis Philosophorum*. I know that all this is not real Middle Ages and that our old doctors debating their *quaestiones quodlibetales* at the Faculty of Arts were more rigorous than Henry Corbin or Gilbert Durand; but the thinking of the Tradition usually proceeds under the banner of a permanent Arthurian Land, continually revisited for enjoying intemporal ecstasies.

10. Last, very last, but not least, the *expectation of the Millennium*. These Middle Ages which have haunted every sect fired by enthusiasm still accompany us and will continue to do so, until midnight of the Day After. Source of many insanities, they remain however as a permanent warning. Sometimes it is not so medieval to think that perhaps the end is coming and the Antichrist, in plainclothes, is knocking at the door.

Which One?

So, before rejoicing or grieving over a return of the Middle Ages, we have the moral and cultural duty of spelling out what kind of Middle Ages we are talking about. To say openly which of the above ten types we are referring to means to say who we are and what we dream of, if we are simply practicing a more or less honest form of divertissement, if we are wondering about our basic problems or if we are supporting, perhaps without realizing it, some new reactionary plot.

Living
in the New
Middle Ages

In any case, there is one sense in which we dream of the Middle Ages so that our era can be defined as a new Middle Ages. I wrote an essay on this subject more than ten years ago, and though some aspects of our time to which I referred then have partly changed, I believe that it is worth reprinting here some of the reflections I expressed then.

First of all, when we say that our age is neomedieval, we have to establish to which notion of the Middle Ages we are referring. To begin with, we must realize that the term defines two, quite distinct, historical periods: one that runs from the fall of the Roman empire in the West to the year 1000, a period of crisis, decadence, violent adjustments of peoples and clashes of cultures, and another that extends from the year 1000 to what in our schooldays was called Humanism, and it is no accident that many foreign historians consider this already a period of full bloom; they even talk of three Renaissances, the Carolingian, another in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the third one, the Renaissance proper.

Assuming that the Middle Ages can be synthesized in a kind of abstract model, to which of the two does our own era correspond? Any thought of strict correspondence, item by item, would be ingenuous, not least because we live in an enormously speeded-up period where what happens in five of our years can sometimes correspond to what happened then in five centuries. Secondly, the center of the world has expanded to cover the whole planet; nowadays civilizations and cultures and various phases of development live together, and in ordinary terminology we are led to talk about the "medieval condition" of the people of Bengal while we see New York as a flourishing Babylon. So the parallel, if we make it, must be established between certain moments and situations of our planetary civilization and various moments of a historical process that stretches from the fifth to the thirteenth century A.D. To be sure, comparing a precise historical moment (today) with a period of almost a thousand years sounds like an insipid game, and it would be insipid if that were what it is. But here we are trying to formulate a "hypothesis of the Middle Ages" (as if we were setting out to fabricate a Middle Ages and were deciding what ingredients are required to make one that is efficient and credible).

What is required to make a good Middle Ages? First of all, a great peace that is breaking down, a great international power that has unified the world in language, customs, ideologies, religions, art, and technology, and then at a certain point, thanks to its own ungovernable complexity, collapses. It collapses because the "barbarians" are pressing at its borders; these barbarians are not necessarily uncultivated, but they are bringing new customs, new views of the world. These barbarians may burst in with violence, because they want to seize a wealth that has been denied them, or they may steal into the social and cultural body of the reigning Pax, spreading new faiths and new perspectives of life. At the beginning of its fall, the Roman empire is not undermined by the Christian ethic; it has already undermined itself by syncretically welcoming Alexandrian culture and the Oriental cult of Mithra or Astarte, toying with magic, new sexual ethics, various hopes and images of

salvation. It has received new racial components, it has perforce eliminated many strict class divisions, reduced the difference between citizens and noncitizens, patricians and plebeians; it has retained its division of wealth but has watered down the distinctions among social roles, nor could it do otherwise. It has witnessed phenomena of rapid acculturations, has raised to government men of races that two hundred years earlier would have been considered inferior, has relaxed the dogmata of many theologies. In the same period the government can worship the classical gods, the soldiers can worship Mithra, and the slaves, Jesus. Instinctively the faith that, in a remote way, seems most lethal to the system is persecuted, but as a rule a great repressive tolerance allows everything to be accepted.

The collapse of the Great Pax (at once military, civil, social, and cultural) initiates a period of economic crisis and power vacuum, but it is only a justifiable anticlerical reaction that has sanctioned seeing the Dark Ages as being so "dark." In fact, even the early Middle Ages (perhaps more than the Middle Ages after the year 1000) were a period of incredible intellectual vitality, of impassioned dialogue among barbarian civilizations, Roman heritage, and Christian-Eastern elements, a time of journeys and encounters, when Irish monks crossed Europe spreading ideas, encouraging reading, promoting foolishness of every description. In short, this is where modern Western man came to maturity, and it is in this sense that a model of the Middle Ages can help us understand what is happening in our own day. At the collapse of a great Pax, crisis and insecurity ensue, different civilizations clash, and slowly the image of a new man is outlined. It will come clear only afterwards, but the basic elements are already there, bubbling in a dramatic cauldron. Boethius, who popularizes Pythagoras and rereads Aristotle, is not repeating from memory the lesson of the past but is inventing a new way of culture, and, pretending to be the last of the Romans, he is actually setting up the first Study Center of the barbarian courts.

It is a commonplace of present-day historiography that we are

living through the crisis of the Pax Americana. It would be childish to fix in a precise image the "new barbarians," also because the word "barbarian" has always had a negative, misleading connotation for our ears. It would be hard to say whether they are the Chinese or the peoples of the Third World or the young protest generation or the Puerto Rican immigrants who are turning New York into a Spanish-speaking city. For that matter, who were the barbarians in the centuries of the decline of the empire: the Huns, the Goths, or the Asiatic and African peoples, who involved the hub of the empire in their trade and their religions? The only specific thing that was disappearing was the Roman, just as the Liberal is disappearing today, the Anglophone entrepreneur whose folk epic was *Robinson Crusoe* and whose Virgil was Max Weber.

In the homes of suburbia the average crew-cut executive still personifies the Roman of ancient virtues; but in the '60's and '70's his son let his hair grow in Indian style, wore a Mexican poncho, played the sitar, read Buddhist texts or Leninist pamphlets, and often succeeded (as in the late empire) in reconciling a dizzying variety of influences—such as Hesse, the zodiac, alchemy, the thoughts of Mao, marijuana, and urban guerrilla techniques. The generation of the '80's seems to be returning to the model of its fathers. But this phenomenon concerns the upper middle class, not the kids we see break-dancing.

Some years ago an Italian geographer, Giuseppe Sacco, discussed the medievalization of the city. A series of minorities, rejecting integration, form clans, and each clan picks a neighborhood that becomes its own center, often inaccessible: We are close to the medieval *contrada* (Sacco teaches in Siena). The clan spirit dominates also the well-to-do classes who, pursuing the myth of nature, withdraw from the city to the garden suburbs with their own shopping malls, bringing other types of microsocieties into existence.

Sacco also discusses the theme of the Vietnamization of territories, theaters of permanent tension because of the breakdown

of the consensus. Among the replies of authority is the tendency to decentralize the great universities (a kind of student defoliation) to avoid dangerous mass agglomerations. In this framework of permanent civil war, marked by the clash of opposing minorities, without a center, the cities will tend more and more to become what we already find in certain Latin American localities, inured to guerrilla warfare, where "the fragmentation of the social body is appropriately symbolized by the fact that the doorman of an apartment is customarily armed with a submachine gun. In these same cities public buildings look like fortresses, and some, the presidential residences, for instance, are surrounded by a kind of earthwork to protect them against bazooka attack."*

Naturally our medieval parallel must be articulated so as not to fear symmetrically opposed images. For while in the other Middle Ages decline in population was strictly linked with abandonment of the cities and famine in the country, difficulty of communication, decay of the Roman roads and postal system, lack of central control, today what seems to be happening (with regard to and preceding the crisis of central powers) is the opposite phenomenon: excess of population interacts with excess of communication and transportation, making the cities uninhabitable not through destruction and abandonment but through a paroxysm of activity. The ivy that slowly undermined the great, crumbling buildings is replaced by air pollution and the accumulation of garbage that disfigures and stifles the big restored buildings. The city is filled with immigrants, but is drained of its old inhabitants, who use it to work in then run off to the fortified suburbs. Manhattan is approaching the point where nearly all its inhabitants will be non-white, as Turin will be almost completely inhabited by southern Italians, while on the surrounding hills and in the plains patrician castles spring up, bound by good neighbor protocol, reciprocal

*"Città e società verso il nuovo medioevo," in U. Eco et al., *Il nuovo medioevo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1973).

distrust, and the great ceremonial occasions for meeting. The big city, today no longer invaded by belligerent barbarians or devastated by fires, suffers from water shortages, blackouts, gridlocks.

The early Middle Ages are characterized also by a marked technological decline and by the impoverishment of the rural areas. Iron is scarce, and a peasant who drops his only sickle into the well has to wait for the miraculous intervention of a saint to recover it (as legends confirm), otherwise he's done for. The frightening decrease in population begins to be reversed only after the year 1000 thanks to the introduction of the cultivation of beans, lentils, and other pulses, with high nutritional value, otherwise Europe would have died of constitutional weakness (the relationship between beans and cultural renaissance is crucial). Today the parallel is inverted, has come full circle: immense technological development causes gridlocks and malfunctions and the vastly expanded alimentary industry has converted to the production of poisonous and carcinogenic foods.

For that matter the consumer society at its maximum level does not produce perfect objects, but rather little machines that are highly perishable (if you want a good knife, buy it in Africa; in the United States it will break on second use). And the technological society is tending to become a society of used and useless objects, whereas in the countryside we see deforestation, abandonment of cultivation, pollution of water, atmosphere, and vegetation, the extinction of animal species, and so on. If not beans, at least an injection of genuine elements is becoming increasingly urgent.

It seems improbable, but the fact is that in his lifetime a man had few occasions to see his neighboring city and many occasions to go to Santiago de Compostela or to Jerusalem. Medieval Europe was furrowed by pilgrimage routes (listed in handy tourist guides that mentioned the abbatial churches the way they list motels and Hiltons today) as our skies are furrowed by air routes that make it easier to travel from Rome to New York than to Rome from Spoleto.

It could be objected that the seminomad medieval society was a society of unsafe journeys; setting out meant making your will (think of the departure of old Anne Vercos in Claudel's *L'Annonce faite à Marie*), and traveling meant encountering bandits, vagabond hordes, and wild animals. But the concept of the modern journey as a masterpiece of comfort and safety has long since come to grief, and boarding a jet through the various electronic checkpoints and searches to avoid hijacking restores perfectly the ancient sense of adventurous insecurity, presumably destined to increase.

"Insecurity" is a key word: This feeling must be inserted into the picture of chiliastic anxieties: The world is about to end, a final catastrophe will close the millennium. The famous terrors of the year 1000 are only legendary—this has now been demonstrated—but throughout the tenth century there was a sneaking fear of the end, and this has also been demonstrated (except that toward the end of the millennium the psychosis was already past). As for our own time, the recurrent themes of atomic and ecological catastrophe suffice to indicate vigorous apocalyptic currents. As a utopian corrective, in the past there was the idea of the *renovatio imperii*; today there is the fairly adjustable idea of "revolution"—both with solid, real prospects, but with a final shift as far as the original objective is concerned (it is not the empire that will be renewed, but there will be a rebirth of the communes and the rise of national monarchies that will control insecurity). But insecurity is not only "historical," it is psychological, it is one with the man-landscape/man-society relationship. In the Middle Ages a wanderer in the woods at night saw them peopled with maleficent presences; one did not lightly venture beyond the town; men went armed. This condition is close to that of the white middle-class inhabitant of New York, who doesn't set foot in Central Park after five in the afternoon or who makes sure not to get off the subway in Harlem by mistake, nor does he take the subway alone after midnight (or even before, in the case of women). Meanwhile, as the police on all sides begin to repress robbery through indiscrim-

inate massacre of good guys and bad, the practice of revolutionary theft and kidnapping the ambassador is established, just as a cardinal and his entourage used to be captured by some Robin Hood and traded for a couple of merry companions of the forest destined for the gallows or the wheel. Final touch to this collective insecurity: the fact that, now as then, and contrary to the usage established by modern liberal nations, war is no longer declared and you never know if there is a state of belligerence or not. For that matter, if you go to Leghorn, Verona, or Malta, you will realize that the troops of the empire are garrisoned in the various national territories as a constant presidium, multilingual forces with admirals continually tempted to use their units to make war (or politics) on their own.

In these broad territories in the grip of insecurities, bands of outcasts roam, mystics, adventurers. In the general crisis of the universities and the plan of uncoordinated student grants, the students are turning into *vagantes*, and they look always and only to unofficial masters, rejecting their "natural educators." And, further, we have on the one hand actual mendicant orders, who live off public charity in the search for a mystical happiness (drugs or divine grace, it makes little difference, particularly because various non-Christian religions appear connected with chemical happiness). The local citizens refuse to accept them and persecute them. As in the Middle Ages the borderline between the mystic and the thief is often minimal, and Manson is simply a monk who has gone too far, like his ancestors, in satanic rites. When a powerful man offends the legitimate government, it implicates him, as Philip the Fair did with the Templars, in sex scandals. Mystical stimulation and diabolical rite are very close, and Gilles de Rais, burned alive for having devoured too many children, was a companion-in-arms of Joan of Arc, a warrior as charismatic as Che. Other credos akin to those of the mendicant orders are asserted, in a different key, by politicized groups whose moralism has monastic roots, with

its recall to poverty, to austerity of behavior, and to "the service of the people."

If the parallels seem untidy, think of the enormous difference, under the apparently religious cover, that obtained among lax, contemplative monks, who in the privacy of their monasteries carried on outrageously, and the active, populist Franciscans, the doctrinaire and intransigent Dominicans, all voluntarily and diversely withdrawn from the social context, which was despised as decadent, diabolical, the source of neurosis and alienation. These societies of reformers, divided between a furious practical activity in the service of the outcasts and a violent theological debate, were riven by reciprocal accusations of heresy and a constant to-and-fro of excommunications. Each group manufactures its dissidents and its heresiarchs, the attacks that Franciscans and Dominicans made on each other are not very different from those of Trotskyites and Stalinists—nor is this the politically cynical index of an aimless disorder, but on the contrary, it is the index of a society where new forces are seeking new images of collective life and discover that they cannot be imposed except through the struggle against the established "systems," exercising a conscious and severe intolerance in theory and practice.

When we come to cultural and artistic parallels the scene proves far more complex. On the one hand we find a fairly perfect correspondence between two ages that, in different ways but with identical educational utopias and with equal ideological camouflage of their paternalistic aim to control minds, try to bridge the gap between learned culture and popular culture through visual communication. In both periods the select élite debates written texts with alphabetic mentality, but then translates into images the essential data or knowledge and the fundamental structure of the ruling ideology. The Middle Ages are the civilization of vision, where the cathedral is the great book in stone, and is indeed the advertisement, the TV screen, the mystic comic strip that must

narrate and explain everything, the nations of the earth, the arts and crafts, the days of the year, the seasons of sowing and reaping, the mysteries of the faith, the episodes of sacred and profane history, and the lives of the saints (great models of behavior, as superstars and pop singers are today, an élite without political power, but with great charismatic power).

Alongside this massive popular-culture enterprise there proceeds the work of composition and collage that learned culture is carrying out on the flotsam of past culture. Take one of the magic boxes of Cornell or Arman, a collage of Ernst, a useless machine of Munari or Tinguely, and you will find yourself in a landscape that has nothing to do with Raphael or Canova but has a lot to do with medieval aesthetic taste. In poetry there are centos and riddles, the kennings of the Irish, acrostics, verbal compounds of multiple quotations that recall Pound and Sanguineti, the lunatic etymological games of Virgil of Bigorre and Isidore of Seville, who immediately suggest Joyce (as Joyce knew), the poetry treatises and their temporal exercises of composition, which read like a script for Godard, and especially the taste for collecting and listing. Which then became concrete in the treasure-rooms of princes or cathedrals, where they preserved indiscriminately a thorn from the cross of Jesus, an egg found inside another egg, a unicorn's horn, St. Joseph's engagement ring, the skull of St. John at the age of twelve [sic].

And over all reigned a total lack of distinction between aesthetic objects and mechanical objects (a robot in the form of a cock, artistically engraved, was given by Harun al Rashid to Charlemagne, a kinetic jewel if ever there was one); and there was no difference between the object of "creation" and the object of curiosity, or between the work of the artisan and that of the artist, between the "multiple" and the unique piece, and, least of all, between the curious trouvaille (the art nouveau lamp and a whale's tooth) and the work of art. All was ruled by a taste for gaudy color and a notion of light as a physical element of pleasure. It is of no

importance that, in the past, golden vases were encrusted with topazes set to reflect the rays of the sun coming through the stained glass of a church, and now there is the multimedia orgy of any Electric Circus, with strobe lights and water effects.

Huizinga said that to understand medieval aesthetic taste you have to think of the sort of indiscriminate reaction an astonished bourgeois feels when viewing a curious and precious object. Huizinga was thinking in terms of post-Romantic aesthetic sensibility; today we would find this sort of reaction is the same as that of a young person seeing a poster of a dinosaur or motorcycle or a magic transistorized box in which luminous beams rotate, a cross between a technological model and a science-fiction promise, with some elements of barbarian jewelry.

An art not systematic but additive and compositive, ours and that of the Middle Ages: Today as then the sophisticated elitist experiment coexists with the great enterprise of popularization (the relationship between illuminated manuscript and cathedral is the same as that between MOMA and Hollywood), with interchanges and borrowings, reciprocal and continuous; and the evident Byzantinism, the mad taste for collecting, lists, assemblage, amassing of disparate things is due to the need to dismantle and reconsider the flotsam of a previous world, harmonious perhaps, but by now obsolete.

Nothing more closely resembles a monastery (lost in the countryside, walled, flanked by alien, barbarian hordes, inhabited by monks who have nothing to do with the world and devote themselves to their private researches) than an American university campus. Sometimes the prince summons one of those monks and makes him a royal counselor, sends him as envoy to Cathay; and he moves from the cloister to secular life with indifference, becoming a man of power and trying to rule the world with the same aseptic perfection with which he collected his Greek texts. Whether his name is Gerbert de Aurillac or McNamara, Bernard of Clairvaux or Kissinger, he can be a man of peace or a man of

war (like Eisenhower, who wins some battles and then retires to a monastery, becoming president of a university, only to return to the service of the empire when the crowd calls him as its charismatic hero).

But it is doubtful that these monastic centers will have the task of recording, preserving, and transmitting the wealth of past culture, perhaps through complicated electronic devices that will recall it a piece at a time, stimulating its reconstruction without ever revealing its secrets fully. The other Middle Ages produced, at the end, the Renaissance, which took delight in archeology; but actually the Middle Ages did not carry out any systematic preservation; rather it performed a heedless destruction and a disordered preservation: It lost essential manuscripts and saved others that were quite negligible; it scratched away marvelous poems to write riddles or prayers in their place, it falsified sacred texts, interpolating other passages and, in doing so, wrote "its own" books. The Middle Ages invented communal society without possessing any precise information on the Greek *polis*, it reached China thinking to find men with one foot or with their mouths in their bellies, it may have arrived in America before Columbus, using the astronomy of Ptolemy and the geography of Eratosthenes.

Our own Middle Ages, it has been said, will be an age of "permanent transition" for which new methods of adjustment will have to be employed. The problem will not so much be that of preserving the past scientifically as of developing hypotheses for the exploitation of disorder, entering into the logic of conflictuality. There will be born—it is already coming into existence—a culture of constant readjustment, fed on utopia. This is how medieval man invented the university, with the same carefree attitude that the vagabond clerks today assume in destroying it, and perhaps transforming it. The Middle Ages preserved in its way the heritage of the past but not through hibernation, rather through a constant retranslation and reuse; it was an immense work of bricolage, balanced among nostalgia, hope, and despair.

Under its apparent immobility and dogmatism, this was paradoxically a moment of "cultural revolution." Naturally the whole process is characterized by plaques and massacres, intolerance and death. Nobody says that the Middle Ages offer a completely jolly prospect. As the Chinese said, to curse someone: "May you live in an interesting period."