

Classical Problems in Periodization: Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, Starn's "The Early Modern Muddle," & Goldstone's "The Early Modern Muddle" by Xaq Frohlich.

At first glance Huizinga's book *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* does not appear relevant to the "early modern" periodization discussions in the Starn and Goldstone articles, and in fact predates the coinage of that term and the ensuing debates over its merit. Instead, *Autumn of the Middle Ages* seems to explore first the medieval, and later the Renaissance mind, hoping to invoke in the reader a connection with those periods that transcends the self-importance of modernity. "We have to transpose ourselves into this impressionability of mind ... before we can judge how colorful and intensive life was then" (p. 7). The numerous anecdotal accounts and textual selections, discussed in a loose, speculative tone with little serious attention to any but the upper classes of those periods, and with sprinkles of well-meaning, but thoroughly condescending truisms ("The sense of justice was still three quarters heathen" p.20 ... "There is a naiveté in the hard-heartedness of the time that makes our condemnation die on our lips" p.24), both support and distract from what only slowly reveals itself in subsequent chapters to be a provocative argument: that the Renaissance was not the birth of the Modern era so much as the death of the Middle Ages.

In the opening chapter Huizinga characterizes the differences between the Medieval and Modern eras through their principle sins, Pride being the primary medieval motive and Greed the Modern driving sin. It is the medieval pride that explains the passionate intensity of the period, as well as its intense morbidity, whereas the materialism of Greed describes the modern weakness. If the Renaissance is to be understood as a continuation of the Middle Ages rather than its end, Huizinga is faced with explaining the material extravagances of the Renaissance as well as its seemingly atheistic pagan revival. In the chapter "The failure of imagination" he argues that the scholastic symbolism outlined in the previous chapter gave way to cataloguing (p. 249); infinite detailing. Art, poetry, and court ritual gave way in like fashion to "unbridled elaboration" (p. 336). The introduction of pagan imagery into humanist art and literature did not represent a new atheism, but rather a continuation of the medieval trend of embellishment combined with the backward-looking nostalgia of the Middle Ages. The humanists' interest in earthly beauty was not material or blasphemous, but instead represented an idealization of the earthly, a depiction of the sublime through earthly beauty. Furthermore, Huizinga claims the "new" optimism brought by humanists, which grew during the enlightenment and into the 18th century, was "shy and a little stiff" (p. 32), not so much a change in the pessimistic medieval temperament (the second path of the second chapter "leading to the improvement and perfection of the world itself") but instead a form of "intellectual" stylistic embellishment used to "soften reality" (pp. 36-38). Huizinga concludes, "Those few in the France of the fifteenth century who adopt humanistic forms do not yet ring in the Renaissance because their sentiments and orientation are still medieval. The Renaissance only arrives when the 'tone of life' is changing..."

Huizinga thus places the 15th century humanists, such as Erasmus, well within the Medieval tradition, and we are able to bring the *Autumn of the Middle Ages* back into the context of the debate raised in the other two articles over the use of the label "early modern." If the Renaissance was only an end to the Middle Ages, then what brought

about the change in the “tone of life,” the new optimism and materialism of the modern period, and to when can we trace that change? Huizinga does not give us a clear answer, though he does indirectly provide clues. (For example, he argues “Economic interests meant the end to formalism” in—international— law, pp. 277-279.) Instead Huizinga presents what is the central dilemma of the Starn and Goldstone articles: “The period of genuine feudality and the flourishing of knighthood ended during the thirteenth century...” (p. 61), and the quasi-capitalist “urban-princely period” that lasted from then up until the clearly modern 19th century represented an uncomfortable hodge-podge of medieval absolutism and proto-modern culture. Starn ultimately settles the matter by wiping his hands entirely of the deceptively progressive imputations of the “early modern” label (offering the field of genealogy as a possible solution to periodization!?!), while Goldstone outlines an alternative label, “Advanced organic societies,” intended to be less Eurocentric and therefore more globally applicable. Throughout all of the reading on this debate, I must admit that I could not shake from my mind the aphorism: “Why is it we can never remember when love first begins, but we always know when it ends?” While these periodizations will continue to serve as useful historical generalizations and pedagogical tools, I wonder if one who sits down to unravel a period’s historical tapestry will ever succeed in finding its beginning.