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THE ITALIAN EXCEPTION: A DEBATE
ON RONALD WITT'S "TWO LATIN
CULTURES OF MEDIEVAL ITALY"

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Searching for Roots. Perils and Virtues of Witt's «Two Cultures»

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*The article deals with Witt's monograph *The Two Latin Cultures* by providing a thorough analysis of the part devoted to the twelfth-century. In particular, the article focuses on the relationship between culture, politics and society as outlined by Witt, and it approaches critically the teleological structure of Witt's "searching for roots" of the Italian exceptionalism.*

The Two Latin Cultures by R. Witt is the first study that attempts to provide a global understanding of the development of written Latin culture in the Italian Middle Ages. In adopting such a general approach, minor lapses are bound to occur. This is only to be expected in such an ambitious study and therefore, I will not touch on this point. I will rather focus on some general and methodological aspects. The book is well worth reading, since it offers a broad interpretation of the path that brought the Renaissance to Italy. Witt addresses some important questions that, to my knowledge, have never been discussed within such a general framework in Italian historiography, even though Italian historians have written extensively on this subject: why did laymen play such a prominent role in cultural production in 12th-century Italy, by contrast to other parts of Europe? What role did these men play in the 13th-century rediscovery of ancient authors? And why, before the early-Renaissance intellectuals, were so few literary works written in

Italy, again by contrast to the rest of Europe? Does it have something to do with the fact that in Italy many legal agreements were recorded in writing? What role did the study of law play in this context, something for which the Italians were famous in Europe?

In this paper I will discuss various interpretations that Witt gives to the above phenomena, with particular regard to the political and social history of the 12th century, which in Witt's reconstruction is the decisive century for the affirmation of the Italian Renaissance. Mine is the point of view of a historian interested in both the history of politics and society, and in cultural history. These are two areas of research which are often kept separate, as if only politics and society were topics proper to historians, while culture were meant to be studied by philologists, literary scholars or anthropologists. One of Witt's merits – among many others – is that he intertwines cultural history with politics and society, and offers a global view of the phenomenon he is discussing. In doing so, Witt proves to be a worthy heir to his school, one made up of prominent historians such as Hans Baron and Paul Oskar Kristeller. At the same time, his interpretation has been updated to encompass recent historiographical trends, according to which literacy and historical context are strictly related to each other.¹ Therefore, in reading this book, I felt methodologically comfortable even though, as I will show, I feel that some of Witt's conclusions are questionable. In my view, the main problem of this book is that it examines the evolution of Italian cultural production in the Middle Ages in the light of its Renaissance outcomes. This teleological approach involves, in some cases, an oversimplification of the complexity of cultural production in its context, to the point that one wonders whether it is legitimate to study a historical phenomenon within such a long chronology in order to understand

¹ Starting from the interpretation of 11th and 12th-century written culture by Stock 1983, which is often mentioned in Witt's book.

its ultimate outcome. Some of the consequences of this approach are discussed below.

1. The first aspect I would like to highlight is the socio-political context in which Witt places the cultural developments of the 12th century. At the beginning of the last chapter, *The return to antiquity*, Witt sums up the constitutive elements of the early Renaissance, looking back to the previous century as the period in which the conditions that led to the Renaissance in Europe matured.

This chapter will bring together some subjects discussed in the previous three chapters: the improved methods of teaching Latin grammar in the school, the diffusion of grammar education among the laity; the generally enhanced vitality of intellectual life; the new audience for poetry created by the importation of French and Provençal literature; and the dire social and political effects of the chivalric ideal that this literature exalted. The combination of these elements in the thirteenth century was to foster the birth of a self-conscious urban morality that subsequently, first in Italy and then in western Europe as a whole, would challenge and ultimately replace the medieval ethos dominated by rural, clerical and chivalric values. [Witt 2012, 438 (2017, 505)].

Ruralism, clericalism and chivalry are, from Witt's perspective, at the core of an ethos that dominated the entire Middle Ages as opposed to the new urban, lay and morally self-conscious ethos of the men of the early 13th-century Renaissance. In reading this passage, I was surprised by the negative opinion the author has of the Middle Ages, similar to the thinking of the Renaissance intellectuals of that period. Were things really like that? Did the knights (*milites*) hinder the development of society? Were knights rural? Or are things more complex than this? If the people of the 12th century were rural and clerical, who were the leading actors behind the many changes in that period? According to Witt, one possible answer is to be found in the dynamics of the commercial revolution.

The dynamics behind the development of Latin culture in Italy in the twelfth century cannot be understood without taking into consideration the commercial revolution that began roughly in the decades around 1100. Economic development affected the demand for education by tending to privilege certain kinds of learning over others, by encouraging a wider stratum of the population to seek literacy and by producing a financial incentive to become a teacher that had largely been lacking in early centuries [Witt 2012, 230 (2017, 272)]

Witt convincingly states that «the economic development affected the demand for education». However, he fails to mention that those responsible for economic growth and the increased demand for education and, more generally, for cultural production were the knights, the very people he accuses of being rural and prone to violence by nature. Following Witt's reconstruction, one would expect to find a merchant class in 12th-century Italy, since he attaches great importance to the commercial revolution as opposed to the chivalric ethos. The concrete effects of this dynamic on society are just sketched out and not described in any detail, which is one of the main drawbacks of this book. If one looks for merchants in the cultural scenario of the 12th century, none will be found, which is a striking absence in a social system based on wealth accumulated through trade. It seems contradictory that the intellectuals of the 12th century and also of the first part of the next century (take the example of Arrigo da Settimiello) – the very same people that brought the Renaissance to Italy – are all either clergymen or knights, namely members of the *militia*, the social and political elite of 12th and 13th-century Italian cities to which Maire Vigueur devoted a brilliant monograph [Maire Vigueur 2004], not mentioned in the bibliography of Witt's book.

Witt does not clarify the reasons for the absence of merchants in his reconstruction. One might think that, in certain contexts, economically and socially dominant classes do not produce written culture; this might have been the case with the merchants of the 12th century. If

so, it would necessitate an explanation. In general, I think that Witt bases his argumentation on a rough opposition between merchants as the proponents of a new ethos and knights (*militēs*) as part of an older political order. However, this socio-political model does not fit the historical reality of the 12th century and even of the first part of the 13th century, since knights were still hegemonic in the cultural production of Italy, and also because knights and merchants were not two different and opposite social categories until the middle of the 13th century, as some scholars have shown [see for example: Petralia 2000]. This is the reason why the “commercial revolution” certainly played an important role in the socio-political scenario of the 12th century and, at the same time, why the knights were still the leading elites of the cities and the most active social group in the cultural production of 12th-century Italy. The reason why Witt insists on the commercial revolution as a driving force in the growth of the 12th century, as opposed to the ethos of the knights, is to be found in the teleological structure of his book, which is conceived as a study on the 13th-century roots of the Renaissance. Therefore, he privileges the characteristic elements of 13th-century intellectuals, considering them to be the point of arrival to which to look in order to understand previous developments. Reading the pages on Albertano da Brescia in the last chapter of the book, I had the impression that at that point the picture was complete. Every disturbing element of the past – ruralism, clericalism, chivalry – had been overcome, while the assumption that the Renaissance was rooted in the previous century had triumphed, even if in a hostile historical reality.

Taken as a whole, Albertano's writing constituted a counterweight to the ethos underlying the divisions that endangered communal peace and weakened Brescia's ability to defend its liberty in the face of outside powers. That ethos, which encouraged partisanship focused on family and personal honor, found its dramatic embodiment in the chivalric genre of literature that celebrated the military hero and emphasized the ethical primacy of loyalty to one's lord in opposition to the citizen's obligation to the republican community. [...] In his first survi-

ving work, *De amore et dilectione Dei*, he outlined a program by which people could live in love of God and their neighbours while leading fulfilling lives as members of a civil society. Directed to urban readers whose prosperity derived from commerce, the work provided a justification for their means to a livelihood. Although necessarily aware of the Church's suspicions of trade and merchants, Albertano emphasized to his audience that, while Cicero had praised agriculture as a source of wealth, "one may also acquire 'good' riches and have licit dealings by transferring things from the place in which they abound to places where they are lacking, especially to the great cities [Witt 2012, 450 (2017, 519-520)].

In Albertano's oeuvre – and in other works by 13th-century intellectuals – it seems as if the conditions posed by the commercial revolution over one century earlier had been fulfilled. Merchants and intellectuals in the 13th century were finally aspiring to peace and stability, in contrast to war and violence, which were the values of the knights. The perils of a teleological perspective like this are evident. Thus, Witt's general approach to the written literature of the 12th century is misleading, too conditioned by a stereotyped vision of aristocratic society as violent and devoted to war by nature. Some examples taken from the historiography of the 12th century can nuance the picture.

2. What was the literary production of the 12th century like? In *The Two Latin Cultures* it is described as juridical-rhetorical and practical, being based on the study of law and rhetoric, and having very concrete purposes in society. Both law and rhetoric were conceived as tools to be used in the conflicts that pervaded every level of society; in both genres Witt registers few or no references to ancient authors and posits a low level of theorization which, in his view, is symptomatic of the practical use of these texts. Two paradigmatic examples are the development of the *ars dictaminis* in Bologna at the beginning of the 12th century and the enrichment of canon law: the former, a branch of ancient rhetoric which by then had lost much of its theoretical depth, was a new means of communication in the fragmented society of the 12th century; the

latter was the reflection of the conflict between Pope and Emperor. Even Provençal literature is seen as a reflection of the violent society in which it was produced. There is no doubt that the society of the 12th century was a violent one: historians have shown this conclusively.² This is not the point I want to discuss; rather, the study of 12th-century literature raises a methodological issue. Is literature a pure reflection of the society in which it is produced? Could literary products like chronicles be seen as something related, at every level, to the context which they describe? In principle, I would say yes. I tend to see literature in a functionalist way, namely as the product of a social system where things are interconnected. However, there is something misleading in Witt's reconstruction, even if his interpretation is without a doubt a functionalist one. Witt analyses an enormous number of texts at once without discussing them in detail. In many cases this leads him to assume that a certain text, just because it was produced in a certain *milieu*, has certain characteristics. This is an overly simplistic way of applying functionalism to literary texts, since the dialogue between texts and contexts is always a complex one. Take the case of the Pisan chronicle of Bernardo Maragone and his son Salem, written at the end of the 12th century. It has all the features of many other texts of this period: it was written by two jurists well integrated into the politics of the city-commune, it has no literary ambitions, it is a very plain text like many other chronicles, with paratactic sentences strung one after the other, it contains no references to classical authors, and it undoubtedly served a practical purpose. What is more, it talks almost exclusively of war. Following Witt, we might say that it is the perfect literary product of 12th-century society. Indeed it is, but in a different way than Witt assumes. A detailed reading of the text reveals that the authors, whilst speaking about the war between the Pisans and many other cities and aristocrats of Tuscany and the Mediterranean in the 12th century, are

² For a systematic view on the (long) 12th century see: Bisson 2009.

obsessed with peace: *pax* is one of the most recurrent words in the text. Moreover, a structural analysis of the chronicle reveals that the wars carried out by the Pisans are always presented as a necessary response to the misconduct of their enemies. Such a reconstruction of events shows that, from the authors' viewpoint, the Pisans were not responsible for the wars, the violence and the bloodshed often described in the text; fighting against one's enemies was not a value *per se*, but a necessary consequence of the political scenario. The war brought *honor* and *fama* to the Pisans, but the authors want to show that the value that the Pisans cared for the most was peace. Does this mean that the Pisan *milites* were not as warmongering as other Italian *milites*? I would say no: they promoted regional wars just as other Italian cities did; war for them was one of the means to accumulate wealth and prestige. However, the intellectual elite of the city, of which Bernardo Maragone and his son were part, had a peculiar perspective on the political life of their *commune*. In writing the history of their city, they both exalted the victories of the *milites* and proposed a political and social order where peace was a *desideratum*. Therefore, the expectations of the various social groups of the city were different. This consideration leads us to the conclusion that a literary product cannot be seen simply as a reflection of the society in which it was produced. Instead, it is a product of the concrete dynamics of a society, which is not a community made up of a group of people living together for the same purpose, but a complex body whose organs move in different directions. The logic behind this movement needs to be identified and understood. The case of Bernardo Maragone and Salem's chronicle shows that 12th-century intellectuals already envisioned peace for their cities, and that it is not necessary to wait for Albertano da Brescia and his colleagues in the mid-13th century to find literary works exploring peace projects for Italian cities. Peace was a political issue already in the works of intellectuals before the return to the ancients and the early Renaissance humanists. This can probably help to nuance the picture sketched out by Witt. In general, it can be

said that Witt paints an excessively rigid picture of aristocratic society in 12th-century cities, a society which was instead complex and shaped by many internal tensions. It could also be shown that references to peace or *concordia* among citizens can be found in Italian city-communes from as early as the end of the 11th century. Therefore, the search for peace was not what distinguished the intellectuals of the 13th century. This calls into question the “originality” of the intellectuals of the Italian Duecento and invites us to evaluate their approach to the topic of “peace” in a new context: might it be possible to see their written reflections on the internal equilibrium of city-communes – at least partly – as a formalisation of political peace-practices like assemblies and public assemblies that in the previous century had yet to be formalised into literary works? Witt himself seems to consider this possibility [Witt 2012, 381 (2017, 440)].

3. In the previous pages I have outlined two main flaws of *The Two Latin Cultures*. The first is the teleological structure of the argumentation, which is based on historical premises that overlook historical complexity or problematic elements in the evolution of the historical processes sketched out; the second is a simplistic functionalism that affects the way literature is conceived in the historical context in which it is produced. Lastly, I would like to say something on another general theme of this book, namely, the idea that cities were the only centres in which Italian written culture was produced. It is undoubtedly true that cities played the major role in Italian politics: this is the main difference between the *Regnum Italie* and the rest of Europe, where cities played a less relevant role in political organisation, and hence in literary production. Some scholars have shown the considerable endurance of the role of cities in the political structure of medieval Italy³. What distinguishes the other *Regna* from Italy is the role of monasteries in the

³ For the latest contribution on this topic, see: Cortese 2017.

production of literary works. On this point, Witt's reconstruction fits with the available evidence, even though there are some important Italian monasteries which he could have included in his analysis. A more complex picture of Italy might have emerged if due consideration had been given to literary production in the 12th century: after centuries of urban predomination, non-urban aristocratic families based in fortified castles in the countryside started supporting literary projects within their courts. This is the case with the Monferrato in Piedmont and with the Guidi in Tuscany. Witt is well aware of the literary production at the court of these families: the Monferrato family was one of the first to import Provençal literature into Italy, while the Guidi were very active in the production of *ars dictaminis* starting from the mid-12th century. What is the significance of the dominance of these families in literary production? Witt explains it, with reference to the second half of the 12th century, as a consequence of the political strengthening of cities in the years following the peace of Constance (1183), which would have triggered a reaction from aristocratic families, who sought to better define their identity [Witt 2012, 355 (2017, 411-412)]. I find such an interpretation misleading. According to recent scholarship, the most appropriate interpretation to give to this phenomenon is precisely one of the opposite sort: the political fragmentation of the 12th century, together with the general economic growth of that period – a historical process of which Witt himself speaks – led both to the emergence of city-communes and to the formation of non-citizen centres of power in the countryside, although certainly to a lesser extent than in the rest of Europe. The economic growth of the cities of the *Regnum* and of aristocratic families in their castles were part of the same process and need to be seen as different outcomes of the political breakdown of the public structures of power that dominated Italy until the 11th century. Therefore, the emergence of the Guidi or of the Monferrato was not an exploit that followed the peace of Constance, but the outcome of a long-term process affecting the whole political structure

of the *Regnum*: a process that also had consequences in terms of literary production. Take the example of the Guidi family. As Elisabetta Bartoli has shown, from the mid-12th century they financed a group of *dictatores* at their court [Bartoli 2015]; at the beginning of the 13th century, Boncompagno da Signa was still at the court of the Guidi. He was one of the most prominent Italian intellectuals in the field of the *ars dictaminis*, and worked for the Guidi at the beginning of the 13th century, as his *Epistola mandativa ad comites palatinos* shows. The activity of *dictatores* in the mid-12th century and of Boncompagno da Signa at the beginning of the Duecento shows that the literary production at the court of the Guidi cannot be seen as a consequence of the peace of Constance and that it was probably part of a broader political project conceived by the family when they were at the pinnacle of their power – a sort of policy of investment in intellectuals. Therefore, *dictatores* and other intellectuals at the courts of aristocratic families were used as instruments of politics in the same way as they were used in cities: it could be said that cities and castles fought with the same weapons.

4. In conclusion, *The Two Latin Cultures* addresses very important questions about why the Renaissance began in Italy, and more specifically about the role of laymen in Italy and their relationship to written culture, which according to Witt is the defining feature of the Italian Renaissance. However, searching for roots can be dangerous: one might be tempted to sketch out an evolutionistic picture of the historical phenomenon one is analysing, which is what happens in Witt's reconstruction in the case of 12th-century literary production. I have shown some of the consequences of this approach. Witt has a stereotyped idea of the chivalric society of the 12th century, considering the *milites* violent and predisposed to war by nature. This has to do with the teleological structure of his book. I have also showed that peace projects were proposed by intellectuals in 12th-century city-communes; I have offered the example of the chronicle by Bernardo Maragone and Salem.

This helps to nuance the picture drawn by Witt, which considers the relationship between literature and society in an overly simplistic, functionalist manner. Lastly, I have invited the reader to reconsider within a new context the cultural production of non-citizen families in 12th-century Italy, something that in Witt's reconstruction is considered a sort of exception.

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