Editorial: The Idea of North

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[1] In European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (1948; English trans. 1953), E.R. Curtius argued that the ‘Renaissance’ was a strictly Italian affair, and that the notion that France, Germany, Britain and other northern European territories experienced ‘Renaissances’ is to be rejected. Rather, he claimed, these lands experienced one or more waves of ‘Italianism’, ‘the export form of the Italian Renaissance’. Since Curtius, new discoveries and new ideologies have fuelled an ongoing debate over the grand narratives we use to conceptualize and periodize cultural production across the north of Europe. It would be impossible to do more than gesture towards the nuances and ramifications of this debate here. A glance at textbooks across a number of disciplines, however, reveals that despite having been subjected to wholesale challenges and serious modifications, an ultimately Burckhardtian notion of the Renaissance has retained considerable currency.

[2] One of our contributors, Jeffrey Chipps Smith, has recently argued in The Northern Renaissance (2004) that at least in terms of the visual arts the North did indeed see a Renaissance, but one in which ‘curiosity about the individual and the natural world was valued more than a renewed dialogue with antiquity’. Locating its origins in Paris and the Netherlands in the late fourteenth century, Smith suggests 1580 as an approximate end date for the Northern Renaissance. In English Literature, however, the late 1580s saw the first appearance of works such as Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene and Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, and are often taken as marking the beginnings of a Renaissance that culminates in Shakespeare, and whose earliest figures include Sir Thomas More and Sir Thomas Wyatt. John Milton, whose Paradise Lost was originally published in 1667, is still regularly taught on Renaissance Literature courses. William Bouwsma’s The Waning of the Renaissance (2000), which focuses largely on northern Europe and deals more broadly with intellectual history, spans the period from 1550-1640.

[3] One of the motives behind the conception of the Journal of the Northern Renaissance, then, has been to offer a forum for serious interdisciplinary exploration of these apparent discrepancies in conceptualization and periodization. Feints towards methodological rigour in this area are too often undercut by an underlying reliance on stale, hazy narratives, and remain entrapped within academic disciplinary boundaries. Both ‘Northern’ and ‘Renaissance’ are up for debate, both as to their meaning and their usefulness. Our seven contributors have provided a lucid and thought-provoking engagement with the north in the Renaissance and the Renaissance in the north, one that we hope will stimulate equally provocative responses.

[4] Jane O. Newman has written extensively on the phenomenon of Renaissance Studies itself as a historical product, drawing attention to the highly charged ideological motivations behind the privileging of the ‘Renaissance’ both as period and style, from the nineteenth century through to the Cold War. Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries a number of German scholars (Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, Erwin Panofsky, Paul Oskar Kristeller) played a particularly prominent role in the establishment of the Renaissance as a prestige discourse in the Anglophone world. For many of these scholars, consideration of the Renaissance was inextricably linked to the Baroque, a critical term whose relevance to much of the cultural production of northern Europe has recently been revitalized by another of our contributors, Peter Davidson, in The Universal Baroque (2008). In her essay here Newman sets Walter Benjamin’s study of the German Baroque ‘mourning play’ (Trauerspiel) in the context of earlier German scholarship, posing pertinent
questions as to why we still study the ‘Renaissance’ and the ‘early modern’ at the Baroque’s expense.

[5] Jeffrey Chipps Smith investigates one of the most enduringly iconic painters of the northern Renaissance: Albrecht Durer. Smith traces the formation of over five hundred years of civic and cultural identity in Durer’s native Nuremberg, focussing on its rich Renaissance artistic production. Yet, as Smith shows, in light of what he terms ‘the topography of expectation’ we must also be critical of Durer’s prime position in this narrative, since his many contemporaries are at times in danger of being marginalised.

[6] In depth case-studies such as Rob Maslen’s investigation of Robin Goodfellow (or Puck) in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* explore the relation of the north to the south. This northern wood spirit, as infiltrant into what Maslen terms ‘a Greek extravaganza’, had an enormous popular presence in Early Modern England. In recovering the profile of Robin, as the good-natured playfellow of controversy, as the mouthpiece for freedom of expression, independent of all authority, Maslen urges us to rethink the enigmatic Puck and his function on the Elizabethan stage.

[7] Adrian Streete’s reassessment of Francis Quarles’ early poetry, meanwhile, offers a subtle interpretation of the inter-relationship between politics, religion and literary endeavour in early seventeenth-century England. By shifting attention from Quarles’ Caroline writing to his Jacobean poetry, Streete demonstrates that moderate Protestant opinion was often no less vociferous in its criticisms of policy and social ills than other more obviously ‘radical’ writers. Ultimately, his essay asks us to rethink the kinds of political interventions that poets in Jacobean England were capable of making.

[8] History, literature and religious controversy converge again on the stage in Kathryn Murphy’s exploration of Robert Burton’s Latin university play *Philosophaster*. Here, north and south are represented by Oxford (where the play was performed) and Osuna, Andalusia (where the play is set). The topicality of Burton’s play, so Murphy demonstrates, has long been misunderstood – and it is only in light of the Gunpowder Plot and its resultant fear of Jesuitism in England that Burton’s work fully comes into its own.

[9] Peter Davidson and Jane Stevenson take us further north, to Aberdeen, and to Hector Boece, principal of King’s College. From Boece’s marginal scribblings in his copy of the Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino’s *De Triplici Vita*, the authors construct a richly suggestive narrative of Scotland’s interaction with the most contemporary renaissance ideas pertaining to astrology, architecture, visual art, and literature. Their passionate article, building on copious examples of Scotland as a refined and cultured nation with a very real renaissance of its own (often entirely ignored by critics), stands as a monument to what may be discovered of the northern renaissance in relation to the south, if we but know where to look. It is to be hoped that Scotland’s historians take note.

[10] Andrew Hadfield takes us yet further afield, in a cogent account of the historiographies of the ‘northern people’ as written by Tacitus, Saxo Grammaticus, and Olaus Magnus. In particular, Hadfield unveils the influence such writings had on the English conceptualisation of the north and its peoples, represented as warlike, free, courageous, and as understanding ‘the real value of liberty’. Ethnographic models of ‘northernness’ are further developed and adapted in local, often nationalist, paradigms of political and cultural identity. Hadfield further shows how such ideals permeate imaginative writing (Spenser, Marlowe), demonstrating that the idea of the north is of enormous influence in the early modern psyche.

[11] Thus, we have in our seven articles a large imaginative scope, touching on visual art, literature, religion, architecture, and also a historicisation of the critical understanding of renaissance scholarship in the early twentieth century. They range from Nuremberg to
Oxford, and from Sweden to Aberdeen. We are confident that these articles, individually and collectively, will stimulate new research, and be generative of further insights into what is the idea of north.

[12] Finally, to conclude: in one of his *Sonnets from Scotland*, Edwin Morgan, Glasgow’s poet laureate and one of Scotland’s most popular contemporary writers, imagines the travels of the medieval Benedictine monk, historian, and polymath Matthew Paris, and particularly so his desire to map out the mysterious north. Morgan’s few lines (from ‘Matthew Paris’, in *Collected Poems*, Carcanet 1996) capture the long-lasting fascination of the north perfectly, and far more eloquently then we could here. His words may fittingly conclude this editorial, and stand as the mission statement of the *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*.

> North and then north and north again we sailed, 
> not that God is in the north or south 
> but that the north is great and strange, a mouth 
> of baleen filtering the unknown, veiled 
> spoutings and sportings, curtains of white cold. 
> I made a map, I made a map of it.

_The Editors_