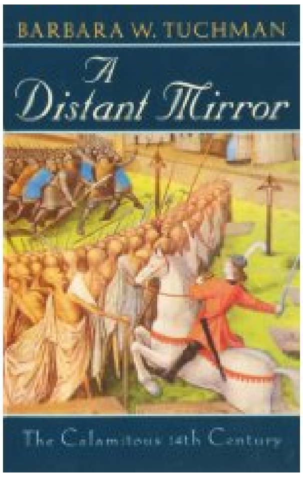

A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century

By

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> "For mankind is ever the same and nothing is lost
> out of nature, though everything is altered."
>
> JOHN DRYDEN
> "On the Characters in the Canterbury Tales,"
> in Preface to Fables, Ancient and Modern

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Foreword

The Period, the Protagonist, the Hazards

The genesis of this book was a desire to find out what were the effects on society of the most lethal disaster of recorded history—that is to say, of the Black Death of 1348-50, which killed an estimated one third of the population living between India and Iceland. Given the possibilities of our own time, the reason for my interest is obvious. The answer proved elusive because the 14th century suffered so many "strange and great perils and adversities" (in the words of a contemporary) that its disorders cannot be traced to any one cause; they were the hoofprints of more than the four horsemen of St. John's vision, which had now become seven-plague, war, taxes, brigandage, bad government, insurrection, and schism in the Church. All but plague itself arose from conditions that existed prior to the Black Death and continued after the period of plague was over.

Although my initial question, has escaped an answer, the interest of the period itself—a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and dis integrating age, a time, as many thought, of Satan triumphant—was compelling and, as it seemed to me, consoling in a period of similar disarray. If our last decade or two of collapsing assumptions has been a period of unusual discomfort, it is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.

Curiously, the "phenomenal parallels" have been applied by another historian to earlier years of this century. Comparing the aftermaths of the Black Death and of World War I, James Westfall Thompson found all the same complaints: economic chaos, social unrest, high prices, profiteering, depraved morals, lack of production, industrial indolence, frenetic gaiety, wild expenditure, luxury, debauchery, social and religious hysteria, greed, avarice, maladministration, decay of manners. "History never repeats itself," said Voltaire; "man always does." Thucydides, of course, made that principle the justification of his work.

Simply summarized by the Swiss historian, J. C. L. S. de Sismondi, the 14th century was "a bad time for humanity." Until recently, historians tended to dislike and to skirt the century because it could not be made to fit into a pattern of human progress. After the experiences of the terrible 2oth century, we have greater fellow-feeling for a distraught age whose rules were breaking down under the pressure of adverse and violent events. We recognize with a painful twinge the marks of "a period of anguish when there is no sense of an assured future."

The interval of 600 years permits what is significant in human character to stand out. People of the Middle Ages existed under mental, moral, and physical circumstances so different from our own as to constitute almost a foreign civilization. As a result, qualities of conduct that we recognize as familiar amid these alien surroundings are revealed as permanent in human nature. If one insists upon a lesson from history, it lies here, as discovered by the French medievalist Edouard Perroy when he was writing a book on the Hundred Years' War while dodging the Gestapo during World War II. "Certain ways of behavior," he wrote, "certain reactions against fate, throw mutual light upon each other."

The fifty years that followed the Black Death of 1348-50 are the core of what seems to me a coherent historical period extending approximately from 1300 to 1450 plus a few years. To narrow the focus to a manageable area, I have chosen a particular person's life as the vehicle of my narrative. Apart from human interest, this has the advantage of enforced obedience to reality. I am required to follow the circumstances and the sequence of an actual medieval life, lead where they will, and they lead, I think, to a truer version of the period than if I had imposed my own plan.

The person in question is not a king or queen, because everything about such persons is *ipso facto* exceptional, and, besides, they are overused; nor a commoner, because commoners' lives in most cases did not take in the wide range that I wanted; nor a cleric or saint, because they are outside the limits of my comprehension; nor a woman, because any medieval woman whose life was adequately documented would be atypical.

The choice is thus narrowed to a male member of the Second Estate—that is, of the nobility—and has fallen upon Enguerrand de Coucy VII, last of a great dynasty and "the most experienced and skillful of all the knights of France." His life from 1340 to 1397 coincided with the period that concerned me, and, from the death of his mother in the great plague to his own perfectly timed death in the culminating fiasco of the century, seemed designed for my purpose.

Through marriage to the eldest daughter of the King of England, he acquired a double allegiance bridging two countries at war, which enlarged the scope and enriched the interest of his career; he played a role, usually major, in every public drama of his place and time, and he had the good sense to become a patron of the greatest contemporary chronicler, Jean Froissart, with the result that more is known about him than might otherwise have been the case. He has one grievous imperfection—that no authentic portrait of him exists. He has, how ever, a compensating advantage, for me: that, except for a single brief article published in 1939, nothing has been written about him in English, and no formal, reliable biography in French except for a doctoral thesis of 1890 that exists only in manuscript. I like finding my own way.

I must beg the reader to have patience in making Coucy's acquaintance because he can only be known against the background and events of his time which fill the first half dozen chapters. Enguerrand (pronounced with a hard "g") made his first mark on history at the age of eighteen in 1358, which does not occur until Chapter 7.

I come now to the hazards of the enterprise. First are uncertain and contradictory data with regard to dates, numbers, and hard facts. Dates may seem dull and pedantic to some, but they are fundamental because they establish sequence—what precedes and what follows— thereby leading toward an understanding of cause and effect. Unfortunately, medieval chronology is extremely hard to pin down. The year was considered to begin at Easter and since this could fall any time between March 22 and April 22, a fixed date of March 25 was generally preferred. The change over to New Style took place in the 16th century but was not everywhere accepted until the 18th, which leaves the year to which events of January, February, and March belong in the 14th century a running enigma—further complicated by use of the regnal year (dating from the reigning King's accession) in official English documents of the 14th century and use of the papal year in certain other cases. Moreover, chroniclers did not date an event by the day of the month but by the religious calendar—speaking, for example, of two days before the Nativity of the Virgin, or the Monday after Epiphany, or St. John the Baptist's Day, or the third Sunday in Lent.

The result is to confuse not only the historian but the inhabitants of the 14th century themselves, who rarely if ever agree on the same date for any event.

Numbers are no less basic because they indicate what proportion of the population is involved in a given situation. The chronic exaggeration of medieval numbers—of armies, for example—when accepted as factual, has led in the past to a misunderstanding of medieval war as analogous to modern war, which it was not, in means, method, or purpose. It should be assumed that medieval figures for military forces, battle casualties, plague deaths, revolutionary hordes, processions, or any groups en masse are generally enlarged by several hundred percent. This is because the chroniclers did not use numbers as data but as a device of literary art to amaze or appall the reader. Use of Roman numerals also made for lack of precision and an affinity for round numbers. The figures were uncritically accepted and repeated by generation after generation of historians. Only since the end of the last century have scholars begun to re- examine the documents and find, for instance, the true strength of an expeditionary force from paymasters' records. Yet still they disagree. J. C. Russell puts the pre-plague population of France at 21 million, Ferdinand Lot at 15 or 16 million, and Edouard Perroy at a lowly 10 to 11 million. Size of population affects studies of everything else—taxes, life expectancy, commerce and agriculture, famine or plenty—and here are figures by modern authorities which differ by 100 percent. Chroniclers' figures which seem obviously distorted appear in my text in quotation marks.

Discrepancies of supposed fact were often due to mistakes of oral transmission or later misreading of a manuscript source, as when the Dame de Coucy, subject of an international scandal, was mistaken by an otherwise careful 19th century historian for Coucy's second wife, at a cost, for a while, of devastating confusion to the present author. The Comte d'Auxerre in the Battle of Poitiers was variously rendered by English chroniclers as Aunser, Aussure, Soussiere, Usur, Waucerre, and by the *Grandes Chroniques* of France as Sancerre, a different fellow altogether. Enguerrand was written as Ingelram in England. It is not surprising that I took the name Canolles to be a variant of the notorious brigand captain Arnaut de Cervole, only to find, when the circumstances refused to fit, that it was instead a variant of Knowles or Knollys, an equally notorious English captain. Though minor, this sort of difficulty can be unnerving.

Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France, is described by one historian as a tall blonde and by another as a "dark, lively, little woman." The Turkish Sultan Bajazet, reputed by his contemporaries to be bold, enterprising, and avid for war, and surnamed Thunderbolt for the rapidity of his strikes, is described by a modern Hungarian historian as "effeminate, sensual, irresolute and vacillating."

It may be taken as axiomatic that any statement of fact about the Middle Ages may (and probably will) be met by a statement of the opposite or a different version. Women outnumbered men because men were killed off in the wars; men outnumbered women because women died in childbirth. Common people were familiar with the Bible; common people were unfamiliar with the Bible. Nobles were tax exempt; no, they were not tax exempt. French peasants were filthy and foul- smelling and lived on bread and onions; French peasants ate pork, fowl, and game and enjoyed frequent baths in the village bathhouses. The list could be extended indefinitely.

Contradictions, however, are part of life, not merely a matter of conflicting evidence. I would ask the reader to expect contradictions, not uniformity. No aspect of society, no habit, custom, movement, development, is without cross currents. Starving peasants in hovels live alongside prosperous peasants in featherbeds. Children are neglected and children are loved. Knights talk of honor and turn brigand. Amid depopulation and disaster, extravagance and splendor were never more extreme. No age is tidy or made of whole cloth, and none is a more checkered fabric than the Middle Ages.

One must also remember that the Middle Ages change color depending on who is looking at them. Historians' prejudices and points of view—and thus their selection of material—have changed considerably over a period of 600 years. During the three centuries following the 14th, history was virtually a genealogy of nobility, devoted to tracing dynastic lines and family connections and infused by the idea of the noble as a superior person. These works of enormous antiquarian re search teem with information of more than dynastic interest, such as Anselm's item about the Gascon lord who bequeathed a hundred livres for the dowries of poor girls he had deflowered.

The French Revolution marks the great reversal, following which historians saw the common man as hero, the poor as *ipso facto* virtuous, nobles and kings as monsters of iniquity. Simeon Luce, in his history of the Jacquerie, is one of these, slanted in his text, yet unique in his research and invaluable for his documents. The giants of the 19 and early 20h centuries who unearthed and published the sources, annotated and edited the chronicles, collected the literary works, read and excerpted masses of sermons, treatises, letters, and other primary material, provided the ground on which we latecomers walk. Their work is now supplemented and balanced by modern medievalists of the post-Marc Bloch era who have taken a more sociological approach and turned up detailed hard facts about daily life—for example, the number of communion wafers sold in a particular diocese, as an indicator of religious observance.

My book is indebted to all these groups, beginning with the primary chroniclers. I realize it is unfashionable among medievalists today to rely on the chroniclers, but for a sense of the period and its attitudes I find them indispensable. Furthermore, their form is narrative and so is mine.

With all this wealth, empty spaces nevertheless exist where the problem is not contradictory information but no information. To bridge the gap, one must make use of what seems the likely and natural explanation, which accounts for the proliferation of "probably" and "presumably" in my text—annoying but, in the absence of documented certainty, unavoidable.

A greater hazard, built into the very nature of recorded history, is overload of the negative: the disproportionate survival of the bad side—of evil, misery, contention, and harm. In history this is exactly the same as in the daily newspaper. The normal does not make news. History is made by the documents that survive, and these lean heavily on crisis and calamity, crime and misbehavior, because such things are the subject matter of the documentary process—of lawsuits, treaties, moralists' denunciations, literary satire, papal Bulls. No Pope ever issued a Bull to approve of something. Negative overload can be seen at work in the religious reformer Nicolas de Clamanges, who, in denouncing unfit and worldly prelates in 1401, said that in his anxiety for reform he would not discuss the good clerics because "they do not count beside the perverse men."

Disaster is rarely as pervasive as it seems from recorded accounts. The fact of being on the record makes it appear continuous and ubiquitous whereas it is more likely to have been sporadic both in time and place. Besides, persistence of the normal is usually greater than the effect of disturbance, as we know from our own times. After absorbing the news of today, one expects to face a world consisting entirely of strikes, crimes, power failures, broken water mains, stalled trains, school shutdowns, muggers, drug addicts, neo-Nazis, and rapists. The fact is that one can come home in the evening—on a lucky day—without having encountered more than one or two of these phenomena. This has led me to formulate Tuchman's Law, as follows: "The fact of being reported multiplies the apparent extent of any deplorable development by five to tenfold" (or any figure the reader would care to supply).

Difficulty of empathy, of genuinely entering into the mental and emotional values of the Middle Ages, is the final obstacle. The main barrier is, I believe, the Christian religion as it then was: the matrix and law of medieval life, omnipresent, indeed compulsory. Its insistent principle that the life of the spirit and of the afterworld as superior to the here and now, to material life on earth, is one that the modern world does not share, no matter how devout some present-day Christians may be. The rupture of this principle and its replacement by belief in the worth of the individual and of an active life not necessarily focused on God is, in fact, what created the modern world and ended the Middle Ages.

What compounds the problem is that medieval society, while professing belief in renunciation of the life of the senses, did not renounce it in practice, and no part of it less so than the Church itself. Many tried, a few succeeded, but the generality of mankind is not made for renunciation. There never was a time when more attention was given to money and possessions than in the 14th century, and its concern with the flesh was the same as at any other time. Economic man and sensual man are not suppressible.

The gap between medieval Christianity's ruling principle and everyday life is the great pitfall of the Middle Ages. It is the problem that runs through Gibbon's history, which he dealt with by a delicately malicious levity, pricking at every turn what seemed to him the hypocrisy of the Christian ideal as opposed to natural human functioning. I do not think, however great my appreciation of the master otherwise, that Gibbon's method meets the problem. Man himself was the formulator of the impossible Christian ideal and tried to uphold it, if not live by it, for more than a millennium. Therefore it must represent a need, something more fundamental than Gibbon's 18th century en lightenment allowed for, or his elegant ironies could dispose of. While I recognize its presence, it requires a more religious bent than mine to identify with it.

Chivalry, the dominant political idea of the ruling class, left as great a gap between ideal and practice as religion. The ideal was a vision of order maintained by the warrior class and formulated in the image of the Round Table, nature's perfect shape. King Arthur's knights adventured for the right against dragons, enchanters, and wicked men, establishing order in a wild world. So their living counterparts were supposed, in theory, to serve as defenders of the Faith, upholders of justice, champions of the oppressed. In practice, they were themselves the oppressors, and by the 14th century the violence and lawlessness of men of the sword had become a major agency of disorder. When the gap between ideal and real becomes too wide, the system breaks down. Legend and story have always reflected this; in the Arthurian romances the Round Table is shattered from within. The sword is returned to the lake; the effort begins anew. Violent, destructive, greedy, fallible as he may be, man retains his vision of order and resumes his search.

A Note on Money

Medieval currencies derived originally from the *libra* (livre or pound) of pure silver from which were struck 240 silver pennies, later established as twelve pennies to the shilling or sous and *20* shillings or sous to the pound or livre. The florin, ducat, franc, livre, ecu, mark, and English pound were all theoretically more or less equivalent to the original pound, although in the course of things their weight and gold content varied. The nearest to a standard was the coin containing 3.5 grams of gold minted by Florence (the florin) and Venice (the ducat) in the mid-13th century. The word "gold" attached to the name of a coin, as franc d'or, ecu d'or, or mouton d'or, signified a real coin. When expressed by the name of the currency alone, or, in France, as a livre in one of its various forms—*parisis, tournois, bordelaise,* each differing slightly in value-the currency in question represented money of account which existed only on this glimpse of the complications of the problem, the non-specialist reader would be well advised not to worry about it, because the names of coins and currency mean nothing anyway except in terms of purchasing power. From time to time, in mention of the pay of men-at-arms, the wages of laborers, the price of a horse or a plow, the living expenses of a bourgeois family, the amounts of hearth taxes and sales taxes, I have tried to relate monetary figures to actual values. I have not attempted to translate various currencies into the equivalent of only one, such as livres or francs, because equivalency kept changing as did the gold or silver content of the coinage; moreover, real coins and money of account under the same name differed in value. I have, therefore, in each case, simply adopted the currency named by the document or chronicler, and would urge the reader simply to think of any given amount as so many pieces of money.

Part One