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Sergio Bertelli, *The King's Body: Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Trans. R. Burr Lichfield. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. xviii + 302 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-271-02102.

Review by Paul Sonnino, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Sergio Bertelli's *Corpo del Re* first came out in Italian in 1990; the occasion for the present review is the enhanced English edition of this work, translated by R. Burr Lichfield and titled *The King's Body*. I would prefer, however, to begin by considering his first edition, for reasons that will become apparent. [1]

"We live today in a world," writes Bertelli in the introduction to his first edition, "where ritual and religion are two distinct concepts, separated by a 'secular' experience which rises from the jurisdictional thought of the six and seventeen hundreds." The central thesis of the book is that this was a world "completely different from our own...immersed in the ritual that pervaded the collective imagination". [2] The intellectual origins of the work are clear enough from the title. Bloch, Kantorowicz, and Giesey have laid the foundation, but Bertelli's methodology goes way beyond that of these fine historians. It draws its *raison d'être* from the insights of structuralism, structural anthropology, and deconstructionism. It is an almost classic example of the postmodern *genre*. With his definition of culture as "a system of symbols externalized in the complexity of rituals," [3] we can have no doubt that we are entering the esoteric precincts of the *nouvelle histoire*.

Bertelli's assertion that in the modern world, *ritual* and *religion* are distinct concepts is a little puzzling, but what he seems to mean by it is that in the modern world we separate *political* from *religious* rituals. That at least is what he suggests in his first chapter, *Sua Maestà*, where he writes that "Under Frederick II the royal court itself was presented as a copy of the church. The body of imperial functionaries came to be considered on the level of a religious order." [4] The evidence that Bertelli advances in order to demonstrate this symbiosis, however, seems hardly commensurate with the majestic sweep of his passive constructions. It comes down to such impressionistic vignettes as that Charles V occasionally put on clerical garb, that Charlemagne minted coins stating that Christ reigned, and that the Byzantine emperors sat on a throne that *resembled* a chariot which *symbolized* cosmic movement.

The original chapter two, *Rituali di Violenza*, illustrates Bertelli's disregard for at least one symbol out of the Middle Ages, Occam's razor. He begins quite sensibly with the premise that "the death of the sovereign opens a moment of profound crisis in the social fabric," [5] but he also maintains that the passing of a leader who has managed over a number of years to impose his personal authority is not sufficient explanation for the disorders that *sometimes* broke out after his death. These were part of a ritual. For his proofs he has to resort to a pogrom which was *contemporaneous* and *subsequent* to the coronation of Richard I, as well as to the inevitable example of Bali, whose inhabitants seem to have made a career out of spoofing anthropologists. But Bertelli's bottom line is that "anyone who would furnish a political-ideological explanation for such disorders would be mistaken." [6]

In the original chapter three, Bertelli extends his search for deeper meanings into formal deconstruction: namely, the deconstruction of a Renaissance triumphal procession, but the purpose of the exercise remains the same. It is to understand the “religious ritual-structure of the ceremony.” [7] And here, of course, we get to the very heart of Bertelli’s methodology, the assumption that there exists in every ritual a force, separate and distinct from any intention of its creators, growing mysteriously within the structure, bellowing out cultural representations, and subservient to the deconstructionist’s wishful thinking. “We must presume,” says Bertelli of the spectators, “that the crowd in the street would be performing precise functions, becoming directly involved in the procession.” [8]

It would be repetitive for me to analyze the rest of the book in similar detail. It suffices to say that after seven more chapters in which Bertelli does his utmost to attach symbolic significance to everything from canopies, bulls, and wax lambs to papal genitalia, we find in a penultimate chapter that these formidable ritualistic structures fall prey to demolition by the first assassin or revolutionary. This was because “Ravaillac had, in a certain manner, captured the *mana*” of Henry IV, and Cola di Rienzo called himself “a soldier of the Holy Ghost.” [9] One might conclude from such examples that ritual is at most an ephemeral and not invariably reliable instrument of cultural propaganda. One might also venture to suspect that there is no such thing as a structure. But Bertelli insists to the end that structures do exist, even though on other occasions, as when they run smack dab into another structure, they transubstantiate into thin air. “In the new climate created by the Puritans,” he writes, “the royal divinity of kingship definitely disappeared.” [10]

Bertelli’s distinction between the sacred and the profane in the modern world, however, is an extremely questionable one. The readers of the *National Enquirer* may have desanctified Prince Charles, but have they succeeded in desanctifying Princess Diana? After all, the attribution of human qualities to gods and divine qualities to humans is a phenomenon as old as society and is not going to be superseded by a mere scientific revolution. In our own times, Karl Mannheim and Carl Becker have convincingly reminded us that all ideologies are systems of faith. If this point requires additional proof, we have only to recall the opening of the second verse of the *Marseillaise*, “*Amour sacré de la patrie...*,” the Battle Hymn of the Republic, “His truth goes marching on...,” and the outrage most recently generated by the attempt to remove the words “under God” from the American pledge of allegiance.

Even more common sense-defying is the notion that these ephemeral rituals carry within their presumed structures the quintessential belief system of an entire society. The methodology of deconstruction has never been and never can become the analytical equivalent of a modern poll, and even a modern poll has to be prepared over a long span of time, be extremely circumspect in its questions, and be extremely circumscribed in its goals. These tools assist us in such specific purposes as marketing products or predicting elections, and, most significant of all, we are in a position to find out eventually whether they were right or wrong. But how can we expect the crude analogy between an imperial court and a church to divulge the secrets of a civilization?

The fact that we cannot poll our ancestors, however, does not mean that we should discard their testimony. What they say or do not say should tell us something, and what it does tell us is not at all consistent with Mr. Bertelli’s deconstructions. Read Joinville’s biography of Louis IX. You will find plenty of practical considerations, plenty of religious sentiments, plenty of practical considerations couched in religious terminology, but the analysis, not to speak of the deconstruction, of any ritual is totally missing—this in the life of a saint. Machiavelli, on the other hand, does take a position on ritual, both political and religious. To him, ritual is an extremely useful instrument, devised by crafty lawgivers to inspire awe and social cohesion in the people. He does look for a hidden message, but in the Bible and on the use of mercenaries. [11] Most of the political elite in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would have agreed with Machiavelli about the political usefulness of ritual, even if they did not accept his manipulations of the true faith, but when push came to shove, their almost exclusive preoccupation when confronting any ritual was with their place in it. Everyone understood that his

precedence—where he sat, whom he walked in front of, how far he was accompanied—symbolized his position in the great chain of being, and everyone defended it savagely. Listen to Louis XIV on this matter: “Since our subjects cannot penetrate into things, they usually judge by appearances, and it most often on amenities and on ranks that they base their respects and their obedience.” [12] On these flesh and blood human beings, Mr. Bertelli would superimpose his deconstruction.

This is not to decry the study of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. Bloch, Kantorowicz, and Giesey have shown the way by asking new questions whose answers were, however, well within the confines of documentary verification. As Marc Bloch began studying the thaumaturgical claims of the kings of France, he asked, “When did they begin to exercise this power? How were they led to make this claim? How did their subjects come to acknowledge it?” [13] Ernst Kantorowicz tried to keep the concept of the king’s two bodies “in its proper setting of medieval thought” and remarked in passing that “practice preceded theory.” [14] Ralph Giesey attempted to examine “what actually happened” at the funerals of the kings of France and nicely illustrated how the “ideas of the times” were “dramatized in the ritual.” [15] None of these historians found any evidence to give the ritual an independent meaning of its own.

When Mr. Bertelli’s book first came out, it was reviewed enthusiastically by Rita Costa Gomez in the *Archivio Storico Italiano*. [16] The revision/translation contains a good number of elaborations, substitutions, and one entirely new chapter, but its most striking disclosure is that Mr. Bertelli seems to have undergone a moment of illumination. “Are we sure,” he announces in a new preface, “that the old rituals of power have disappeared?,” [17] citing the heart of Marat, the Cult of the Supreme Being, and the “Distribution of Eagles” to illustrate his insight. It is hard to know what to make of this recantation of his central thesis as an excuse for its republication, until we consider that one of the principal tenets of postmodernism, so candidly enunciated by Horkheimer and Adorno, is to “deny any allegiance to current linguistic and conceptual conventions.” [18] But if this is the case, if there is no difference between “yes,” “no,” and “maybe,” I can only conclude that to postmodernists scholarship is a perverse and constantly redoubling joke.

NOTES

[1] Sergio Bertelli, *Il corpo del re: Sacralità del potere nell’Europa medievale e moderna* (Florence, 1990). My translations from this edition may vary slightly from Mr. Litchfield’s in the English edition.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 9

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 10

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 22

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 36

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 49

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 56

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 60

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 210, 212

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 243

[11] *The Prince*, Ch. XIII.

[12] *Louis XIV, Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin*, ed. Paul Sonnino (New York and London, 1970), p. 144.

[13] Marc Bloch, *Les Rois Thaumaturges*, trans. J.E. Anderson (London and Montreal, 1973), p. 12.

[14] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theory* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 6, 273.

[15] Ralph E. Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France* (Geneva, 1960), Preface.

[16] *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 148 (1990), pp. 961-963.

[17] Preface to the English edition, p. xv.

[18] Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung, Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam, 1947), p. 6.

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