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Michael Moriarty. *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xii + 271 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$170.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-19-926146-6.

Michael Moriarty. *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xviii + 430 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$125.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-19-929103-9.

Review by Paul Cohen, University of Toronto.

With a characteristic blend of perspicacity and provocation, Pierre Bourdieu remarks at the start of the *Méditations pascaliennes* that:

J'avais pris l'habitude, depuis longtemps, lorsqu'on me posait la question, généralement mal intentionnée, de mes rapports avec Marx, de répondre qu'à tout prendre, et s'il fallait à tout prix s'affilier, je me dirais plutôt pascalien... [1]

It could be said that Michael Moriarty, in the works under review, has sought to think through the same conundrum. The seeming paradox which stands at the heart of Bourdieu's caustic quip could be formulated thus: in what way did a devoutly Jansenist author of spiritual writing and anti-Jesuit polemic, committed first and foremost to self-examination and to knowing God, supply methodological inspiration to a sociologist of social conflict and of the struggle for symbolic domination? For Moriarty, the terms of the puzzle are not all that different: how did seventeenth-century French Catholic writers rework the Augustinian tradition in which they were so deeply imbued in order to invent radically new and recognizably modern epistemologies and conceptions of the individual.

Both Bourdieu and Moriarty recognize in seventeenth-century Augustinianism—above all in its pessimism concerning both human nature itself and the capacity to attain knowledge of the world—as the true foundations for modern conceptions of epistemology, society and the self. For Moriarty, it was this religiously-inflected early modern “suspicion”—about human motivations and the reliability of sensory evidence gleaned from experience—far more than Enlightenment thought, which furnished the conceptual vocabulary for modern, secular-minded skeptics like Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx. For Bourdieu, Pascal's belief that people's efforts to please others unconsciously shape their own sense of self provides a foundation for his own analysis of the ways in which ceaseless competition for status and social differentiation is sublimated into socially pacified forms of experience which appear perfectly natural.

Interestingly, Moriarty's methodological starting point in his first book, far from being Pascalian, was instead resolutely Marxist. In *Taste and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century France*, a monograph based on his Ph.D. dissertation, Moriarty presented an intellectual history of the invention of “good taste,” interpreting it as the ideology of seventeenth-century France's dominant class. Explicitly distancing himself from Bourdieu's own sociology of taste[3], he chose in this monograph neither to draw inspiration from Alain Viala's application of Bourdieu's categories to seventeenth-century literature in

the *Naissance de l'écrivain*, nor to participate in the debates provoked by Viala's study over whether the world of French letters became an autonomous literary 'field' during the *Grand Siècle*.^[4] Moriarty instead drew inspiration from more orthodox Marxist critics like Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser and Terry Eagleton to argue that seventeenth-century men of letters mobilized literature in order to redefine the social order and erect new barriers between elites and commoners. Joining close readings of Antoine Gombauld de Méré, Saint-Évrémonde, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère and Boileau's writings on taste with a somewhat schematic vision of early modern French society, he argued that the sword nobility invented "good taste" as a weapon in its struggle against the increasingly assertive robe nobility. Taste thus constituted a mechanism for social differentiation, one which both sorted out elites from commoners based on their mastery of a complex set of cultural practices and furnished a set of representations of these criteria as perfectly natural reflections of one's virtue. The idea of taste was, in short, the ideology of the *honnête homme*, a set of values produced by the sword and robe in their struggle for domination.

In the two works under review, Moriarty returns to much the same terrain, the canonical writers of the *Grand Siècle*. But for readers familiar with his first book, apparent similarities end there. Rather than hew to class-based literary analysis, Moriarty has taken up an altogether different set of questions. In this ambitious multi-volume project, he proposes instead to shed light on the cultural foundations of modernity, by exploring how the emergence of a modern sense of self traces its roots to early modern declensions of Augustinian thought. Moriarty has thus joined an increasingly lively historiographical conversation which Charles Taylor did much to energize with his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*.^[5] Taylor drafted the outlines of a *longue durée* history of personhood in which he identified Augustine as one of the primary architects of a self founded on individual subjectivity.

Scholars writing both before and since the publication of Taylor's vast tome have for the most part also emphasized Augustine's influence, and highlighted the early modern period in particular as a crucial moment when Augustinian thought was revived and transformed. In his well-known Marxist reading of Pascal and Racine, Lucien Goldmann attributed the emergence of individualism and a secularized vision of the world to an Augustinian-influenced bourgeois embrace of rationalism.^[6] More recently, Jean Rouhou has seen the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a period of crisis in which the Wars of Religion, the growth of commercial wealth and technological progress wrought a fundamental shift in the human condition: individuals ceased to consider themselves subordinated to a social system, natural order, or divine disposition and instead began rationally to seek their subjective fulfilment. Although Jerrold Seigel concurs with this chronology, he emphasizes John Locke's influence rather than that of French Augustinians. Some recent contributions have dissented from this narrative's broad outlines: Dror Wahrman for example argues that the modern self was rooted more in eighteenth-century social and political conflict rather than in an older and strictly intellectual history; Jan Goldstein identifies the nineteenth century as the critical phase.^[7]

Moriarty's two-volume study of early modern French thought takes up the broad outlines of Taylor's story in order to examine the ways in which writers like Boileau, Descartes, La Bruyère, La Rochefoucauld, Malebranche and Pascal reworked Augustinian modes of construing metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and the individual.

In the first volume, entitled *The Age of Suspicion*, Moriarty examines how Descartes, Pascal, and Malebranche's metaphysics all shared a common Augustinian skepticism. His principal aim here is to challenge an older vision of Descartes in particular (and much seventeenth-century thought more generally) as a philosopher convinced that humans' faculty to reason offered a tool with which to discern truth transparently. As much recent work has shown (which Moriarty acknowledges in his book) Descartes's philosophy is in fact predicated on a profound mistrust of both the senses and common sense. Rather than a sure instrument for accumulating sound empirical knowledge, reason is an inescapably uncertain capacity whose utility is limited to interrogating human beings' flawed experience

of the world and their treacherous sensory perceptions. For Moriarty, then, Descartes should be properly read alongside the more notorious *Grand Siècle* skeptics like Pascal and Malebranche. All three thinkers prolong an Augustinian anthropology in order to emphasize how utterly dependent on subjectivity human knowledge, social relations and personhood are.

Moriarty pursues his investigation of the seventeenth-century Augustinian moment in his second volume, *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves*. Here, he focuses on the twin themes of self-love and self-knowledge and explores their treatment at the hands of a wide range of writers, including Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Corneille, Antoine Arnauld, and Pierre Nicole. Moriarty's interest here is broad-ranging, as he examines both formal treatments of ethics and the ethical dimensions of theater and other literary genres. The Augustinian conception of original sin offered a set of internal logics which these authors used in order to develop a new conception of humanity. Their conviction that all human faculties had been without exception corrupted at the Fall led them to question people's capacity to develop sound epistemologies, metaphysics and ethics. This in turn drew French thinkers inward, encouraging them to reflect on the human psyche and to develop a novel psychological understanding of human nature. Moralists and dramaturges alike participated in this movement by constructing increasingly rich psychological descriptions of individuals. This deeply pessimistic outlook on the human capacity for virtue and knowledge and society's potential to achieve justice or the common good, grounded as it was on a fundamentally theological outlook inherited from Augustine and Jansenius, was nonetheless the foundation for the secularized understandings of self and society developed by Hobbes, Spinoza, and later thinkers.

Wearing his learning lightly in these two volumes, Moriarty articulates convincing and often novel readings of seventeenth-century French moral and philosophical writing. They shed considerable light on the importance of Augustinian thought, and the wide-reaching theologically-based skepticism it inspired, in the seventeenth century. They also contribute to the growing historiography on the invention of the modern self. While Moriarty's arguments do not significantly depart from the grand Augustine-centered outline traced by Charles Taylor and others, these stimulating and engagingly written works should command the attention of scholars interested in these questions. But perhaps the most interesting thread that runs through Moriarty's argument is the common concern which quietly links them to his first monograph. While epistemology and personhood rather than class struggle constitute his central concerns here, Moriarty is also interested in how a worldview defined by suspicion shapes social life and social difference. As the author of a sociology of "bad faith" founded on a vision of individuals who do not understand their own true motivations or the nature of their relations to others, Bourdieu too pondered similar questions. And just as Bourdieu found in Pascal a lucid decoder of the deeply hidden structures of social power, Moriarty sees in the Augustinian theology of the Fall the basis not only for modern subjectivity, but also for secular exegeses of the inherent violence of social relations conceived by thinkers like Marx himself.

NOTES

[1] Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), p. 9.

[2] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

[3] Moriarty makes this clear in *Taste and Ideology*, p. 4. Bourdieu outlined his concepts of social and cultural capital and field notably in *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979); he applied these concepts to literary activity in *Les Règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

[4] See Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain. Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985). For a useful review of this debate, see Robert A. Schneider, "Political Power and the Emergence of Literature: Christian Jouhaud's Age of Richelieu," *French Historical Studies* 25/2 (Spring 2002): 357-80.

[5] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

[6] *Le Dieu caché. Étude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), especially chapter five.

[7] Rohou, *Le XVIIIe siècle. Une révolution de la condition humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) and Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience since the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Wahrman, *Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004); Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). On the eighteenth century, see also Charly J. Coleman, "The Value of Dispossession: Rethinking Discourses of Selfhood in Eighteenth-Century France," *Modern Intellectual History* 2/3(2005):299-326 and "Illuminating the Self in Eighteenth-Century France," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University (2005). For a review essay of the recent literature on the self, see Gregory S. Brown, "Am 'I' a 'Post-Revolutionary Self'? Historiography of the Self in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution," *History and Theory* 47/2(May 2008):229-48.

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