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Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xi + 276 pp. Appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-34972-1; \$24.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-34974-8.

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This is an ingenious and ground breaking book that should revamp the way that “French theory” is figured in current academic discourse. Those who practice theory, especially those who see themselves as theoretical medievalists, are provided by Holsinger with a boundless stock of ammunition to be used in answering their critics’ charges that the theory they use is anachronistic or even that the concept of theory itself is hopelessly out of synch with medieval practice; and those who see themselves as exclusively modernist might have to re-examine their position. What Holsinger argues in this book is that the very notion of post-World War II “French theory”, a phenomenon that is often accused of being a- or anti-historical, dismissive of theology, excessively secularizing, insensitive to linguistic nuance and cultural difference, is, on the contrary, bathed in medieval concepts, discourses, sometimes even composed in response to, or dialogue with, medieval texts. The key, posed in the Epilogue, is never far from the surface: “how is it that the most consistently abject era in the Western tradition came to assume such a formative role in avant-gardiste theorization of language, culture, society?” (p. 197).

Holsinger begins with an extensive introduction in which he presents in a packed twenty-five page *précis* the positions that he will be arguing and the summaries of chapters to follow. For the reader pressed for time, this might actually be sufficient in that he clarifies here the full project and distinguishes it from possible misconceptions (e.g., this is not a study on how “medievalisms” of the nineteenth century, often having little to do with anything actually medieval, carried into the twentieth century). Instead, the argument he presents is much more daring: the medieval “theories” which bolster much of the self-consciously avant-garde theory of postwar France serve “less as detached objects for the fetishist’s sterile delectation than as productive sacraments of creative ingenuity, partial remains from an unknowable past invested nevertheless with a transformative capacity in the critical present” (p. 5). Though several early modern and postmodern scholars are rapped for their uncritical caricatures of the Middle Ages as monolithic, unified, and somehow simple, Holsinger’s point is not simply to reverse that polarity. He instead argues that some of the most influential French theorists actually absorbed from their medieval models the means to conceptualize “the nature of ethical inquiry, the historical processes of subject formation, the social implications of scriptive technologies, and the ideological consequences of periodization itself” (p. 14). His aim therefore is not simply to rehabilitate medieval studies in a university culture that has found it relatively easy and certainly convenient to ghettoize them or simply let them wither on the vine. He also wants to insist on the rhetorical vacuity of postmodern claims to have cut ties with history, reinvented the present from the ashes of the past. Bruno Latour’s ironic characterization of avant-garde modernists as Attilas who have destroyed their past and left nothing in their wake serves as the opening to the Epilogue, a *postface* in which Holsinger claims that the avant-garde’s relation to the medieval past is “sacramental”—not necessarily Christian or even religious (but then again, see the comments that follow on Lyotard’s “conversion”), but because it participates in an invocation of the medieval past, a translation of texts and vocabulary, a transubstantiation of snippets of medieval theory that become in the hands of Georges Bataille, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and Jean-François Lyotard, a sort of hologram, present but intangible, visible yet insubstantial. These are not medievalists who then went on to study more important, because more contemporary, topics (as in the case of, say, René Girard); they are scholars imbued with the medieval

theory they studied in their early schooling, militants who subsequently reutilized, often in disguised form, the tools and philosophical concepts that they had absorbed at an early age.

The first section is given over to Georges Bataille and in my estimation this is the most successful section of an entirely successful book. We need reminding that Bataille was a medieval archivist and paleographer by training, that his atheological tract (*La somme athéologique*) is actually profoundly religious and that his foremost intellectual mentor was Thomas Aquinas. Bataille is rightly considered by most a radical modernist eager to break free from the ties of the past; but as Holsinger shows, this does not mean that he was eager as well to forget it. His intellectual development was almost entirely constructed in dialogue with that past, and particularly with the work of Aquinas, from his early research on medieval romance and *fatrasies* to his later work on economic theories of sacrifice and expenditure. Bataille's mystical project, for example, went largely unrecognized after his death and has been ignored as embarrassing, until very recently, by even his most assiduous commentators. As Holsinger argues, this "para-Thomist" was not out to annihilate Aquinas by writing a counterattack on his Christian systematization, but rather to use him as a model, a guide by which, in alliance with Angela of Foligno, he could expose "both the hilarity and the tragedy" of the "attempt to systematize Christian knowledge in the face of the inevitable non-knowledge of God" (p. 37).

What Holsinger does here is re-imagine Bataille through a thorough reading of the *Somme athéologique* and *La part maudite* (*The Accursed Share* in English translation), finding structure and modeling in what some have called the ravings of a madman. What emerges from this discussion is renewed respect for Bataille, this progenitor of most of the later and most influential theory of post-war France, this interlocutor of Lacan, Derrida, and perhaps most importantly, Foucault. Holsinger's intellectual genealogies establish that Foucault's *Moi, Pierre Rivière* is the stepchild of Bataille's *Gille de Rais*, for example. This is not done simply to argue for "influence" or genealogy, but rather to suggest that Bataille served on any number of levels as the conduit to medieval thinking and method for much of the intellectual generation that followed.

Lacan's reading of "courtly love" is similarly read as indebted to Bataille's notion of *la part maudite*, the morbidity associated with the Real, and this insight introduces a long chapter's discussion of Seminar VII, the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. As Holsinger makes clear, Lacan's own Catholic boyhood, Jesuit schooling, and subsequent rejection of that brand of devout Catholicism provided one of the many links with Bataille. Both were involved with the avant-garde surrealist movement, both attended Kojève's influential lectures on Hegel in the 1930s, and both married the same woman, though Bataille, as usual, got there first. His notion of an amoral medieval ethics of sovereignty and expenditure greatly influenced Lacan's formulation of psychoanalytic ethics, a formulation that cannot properly be understood without some knowledge of the courtly, theological and philosophical theorizing of the Middle Ages that inspired it. Once again, Lacan structures the seminar around medieval templates, what Holsinger calls his "ethical stylistics", a "peculiar confection of Bernadine textual devotion (to the writings of Freud) and an Abelardian combativeness" (p. 66).

None of this talk is hyperbolic; Holsinger demonstrates step-by-step all of the affinities and likely sources. Lacan begins the seminar with metaphors of succor and nourishment (Bernard de Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* being the model), then proceeds to lay out "an ethics of negation, an apophatic ethics" (p. 67) in which courtly love, the aestheticization of giving ground to one's desire, plays a major role. Holsinger ends his disquisition on Lacan with typical flair, claiming that Lacan's own seminar should be read as an apocalyptic act of genealogical research that is in itself medieval. Lacan's stylistic tics of reviving, repeating, and unearthing, so characteristic of both medieval intellectual inquiry and psychoanalytic rhetoric, were aimed in this seminar at staving off "the hopelessness of a future sadly bereft of the desire to misbehave" (p. 93).

The Bourdieu and Derrida chapters are perhaps less striking but this is in part because we have by now taken on board Holsinger's thesis and are simply admiring his dazzling demonstrations. Bourdieu got his signature term, "habitus", not from Marcel Mauss, as some have assumed, but from Erwin Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, which he translated in 1967 and to which he responded in a thirty-two-page *postface*/meditation on Panofsky's contribution to a sociology of knowledge (included in the appendix in its first English translation). In a passage that sounds as much self-referential as diagnostic, Holsinger claims that what Bourdieu saw in Panofsky's achievement was a way "to take practices of cultural analysis beyond the exposure of homologies or structural similarities between social and aesthetic practices to a deeper, 'antidisciplinary' understanding of the logic of cultural practice itself" (p. 109). While Bourdieu's medievalism is then at one remove from the actual historical period, Jacques Derrida's is not. *De la grammatologie*, dating also from 1967 and from the same press (Minuit) as Bourdieu's work, is read by Holsinger as a meditation on the sounds and spaces of liturgy, a study that participates in the same archaeological excavation of the premodern that we observed in Bourdieu, Bataille, and Lacan. Contrasting the curious epithets that Derrida has attracted since—nihilist, radical secularist, closet purveyor of apophatic discourse of negative theology—Holsinger comes down on in favor of the latter as he shows that Derrida's work, from the earliest period, consistently evokes the medieval (glossing in *Glas*, allegory in the *La carte postale*), and confronts overtly sacramental ontology and religious rhetoric.

From his grappling with Levinas to his critique of Rousseau's eschatology in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Derrida was out to attack metaphysics where he found it but without denying the importance of negation or the power of apophatic thought. In a wonderful passage, Holsinger argues that Rousseau and Foucault, both targeted by Derrida for their invention of simpler epochs (the pre-medieval in Rousseau's case and the medieval itself for Foucault) also attempt to theorize a block of time free from the dissension and supplementary character that would negate the temporal distinctions upon which their arguments depend. Holsinger argues against both the radical orthodox critique and the nihilist accusers for a theological Derrida, one who "almost seems to be suggesting that the supplement is itself a kind of sacrament, a liturgically enacted confirmation and reminder of the inspiring presence of absent things..." (p. 150).

The final chapter on Barthes is almost *de trop*, so firmly has the author established his thesis as unassailable by this point, but he still manages to undermine the power of the postmodern, or at least display its debts to its medieval predecessors, by showing that Barthes's theorization of textual analysis in *S/Z* is based on the most classic and imaginative of Biblical exegetical practices. The whole theological phenomenon of French *ressourcement*, that post-war advocacy of redeploying ancient and particularly medieval exegetical techniques in the work of Church reform, emerges from Holsinger's discussion as heroic, with Henri de Lubac and his influential statement and defense of textual analysis at its head. Barthes may never have come clean on his debts to de Lubac, but his long essay on Loyola and the methodology outlined in *S/Z* are modeled very closely on de Lubac's "four senses of scripture." What Barthes changed in the adaptation (four levels of analysis to five, for example) Holsinger points out, defends, and traces clearly to its source. Taking us through an historical tour of the *Annales* school and the journal, *Tel Quel*, Holsinger establishes, really beyond any doubt, that the work of the postmodern French theorists, especially in the case of Barthes, is a collaborative mode of production, a school of *compilatio*, in which writers, models, and readers all participate in the confection of the text, a secularized version of de Lubac's notion of the work of God.

Any quibbles with this book are minor and easily answered. Is it a bit repetitious? Yes, occasionally it is, but only in the aim of offering self-contained, pedagogically useful chapters. Are the occasional digressions inappropriate? I suppose so, but they also prove essential, sign-posting what is to come or pinpointing just how what one has read will relate to what follows. I do not object (as Holsinger says

some of his readers did) to the extended discussions of Teresa Brennan's *History After Lacan*, or Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* right in the middle of chapters supposedly dedicated to Lacan and Derrida. Such discussions provide a breather from some of the denser writing and actually illuminate, sometimes in very important ways, how the implications of the argument extend far beyond the narrow confines of Derridean or Lacanian theory. Does he make too much of coincidence? Perhaps occasionally, as in Lacan's imagined manuscript of Rénouart (probably just a misnomer, and not his only one) but it still provides for a bit of fun. And the writing itself? Imaginative, pithy ("Lacan's typically conflative performances of modest narcissism" [p. 62]; "Liturgy defeats synchrony just as it swallows diachrony" [p. 131]), often funny, sometimes scathing, rarely moving into the parody of theoretical discourse one often finds in such para-theoretical works. There are a few typographical errors—Jean-Charles Huchet's *Littérature médiévale et psychanalyse* gets attributed to Jean Ancelet-Hustache, for example, a tripping up that has a very Lacanian ring to it (Rénouard/Raynouard). Holsinger's own investment in this topic could be more clearly road-mapped; some explanation of how his interest in critical theory developed and grew and at what point he began to notice the theology within the theory.

What he has done so brilliantly, nonetheless, is to signal just how impossible it is to escape from religiosity, even, and especially, when one self-consciously highlights his rejection of it. It is this leitmotif that makes this book much more than just a scholarly survey. *The Premodern Condition* moves beyond criticism into philosophy, beyond history and into epistemology, making it not only an essential book for medievalists but one that could make medievalists of us all. This critique of narrow periodization and short-sighted disciplinary borders makes for scintillating reading; and its re-imagining of theory as a present body guided by the philosophical and medieval cast of its genotype is nothing short of brilliant.

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