

Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars

Volume 2, Issue 2

2004

Editor's Notes

Michael Papio*

*,

Editor's Notes

Among the more fashionable catch phrases of late, for those who take note of such things, are “Post-Structuralist Medievalism,” “New Medievalism,” “Neo-Medievalism” and the like. Many of our colleagues will explain that “New Philology” or “New Medievalism” was kicked off by the 1989 study of Bernard Cerquiglini (currently le directeur de l'Institut national de la langue française) entitled *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie*. In it, Cerquiglini presents what is, or has widely been interpreted to be, a full-fledged attack on the very essence of traditional philology, even directly or indirectly spawning a special edition of *Speculum* in 1990. But wait. While the polemical fires could still be seen burning from the windows of widely scattered ivory towers, Norman Cantor (likewise no stranger to controversy) published his 1991 bestseller *Inventing the Middle Ages*. “The Middle Ages are much like our culture of today,” he writes, “but exhibit just enough variations to disturb us and force us to question some of our values and behavior patterns and to propose some alternatives or at least modifications. The difference is relatively small, but all the more provocative for that” (47). Cantor helped diffuse the idea that analogies to the Middle Ages were to be found all around us and in turn allowed for what Utz and Shippey call (in the introduction to their volume *Medievalism in the Modern World*) the “post-medieval reinvention of medieval culture” (4). In the very same year, Brownlee, Brownlee and Nichols edited a collection of articles called precisely *The New Medievalism* (1991) and kicked off another round of heated discussions. As if the waters were not yet muddied enough, just two years after that, Alain Minc (the same who – together with Gallimard – was fined 100,000 francs for plagiarizing the work of Patrick Rödel) published his provocative *Le nouveau Moyen Âge*, in which he draws parallelisms between the Middle Ages and “l'après-communisme,” playing on, one hopes, Nicolas Berdiaeff's 1927 homonymous (at least in French translation) work. In the brief span of five years, colleagues from several disciplines were walking the hallways in conversations about very different things that shared strikingly similar monikers. The terminology of a “new medievalism” had become the props of at least three distinct dramas. On one stage, there raged a discussion on the status of material documents in relation to the “intentional work.” On another, as William Paden explained, “New Medievalism means Postmodern Medievalism, study of the Middle Ages from a consciously held postmodern perspective, a point of view which distinguishes itself from modernity.”¹ And on still another, “New Medievalism” belongs to a line of thought extending from Hedley Bull, the English political scientist who published *The Anarchical Society* in 1977, who saw “more ubiquitous violence” (179) as a result of the transformation of a system of world monarchy (political superpowers = Church and Empire) into one in which individual nation-states exist in a neo-feudal climate of autonomous sovereignty and overlapping loyalties.

Before the newly knighted neo-medievalist sallies forth into any of these scholarly (mine) fields, it would be prudent to step back and review our purposes in a slightly different focus. In fact, let's let Jacques Le Goff do it for us:

Qu'est-ce que l'histoire? C'est l'étude de l'évolution des sociétés. Comme le pensait déjà Marc Bloch, le passé n'est intéressant que dans la mesure où il éclaire le présent. C'est particulièrement vrai pour le médiéviste, dans la mesure où il me semble que le Moyen Age est la période dans laquelle est née la modernité. Je précise ici que le Moyen Age ne fut pas une

¹ “‘New Medievalism’ and ‘Medievalism,’” *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 10 (1995): 233.

époque obscurantiste comme l'ont prétendu les Lumières et les Romantiques. Le combat pour la laïcité au XIX^e siècle a en effet contribué à repousser l'idée du Moyen Age comme civilisation progressiste.²

Though these ideas are certainly not new to specialists, the brief paragraph in which they appear here (alongside the fact that he is still moved to articulate them) sums up quite nicely some of the concepts we are considering. The plants of new medievalism mentioned above can be fairly seen to sprout from two seeds: one from "l'étude de l'évolution" and the other from "l'évolution de l'étude." We use the Middle Ages to understand the present and also analyze the Middle Ages according to our present points of view. Unfortunately for anyone who wishes to clarify things, the two vines are often so intertwined that it is at times a difficult task to separate them. Further complicating matters is the fact that, although most of our readers will be acquainted with at least one of the types of "New Medievalism" that we have mentioned, most of our students would unhesitatingly use the term to describe something wholly different (perhaps ranging from movies about princesses and jousts to the "New Gothic" – now two steps removed – fashion of black clothing and heavy mascara... or even on a poster for the collegiate fencing club). Their, we may as well admit it, far better disseminated use of "medieval" has been traced down to Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, in which actor Ving Rhames utters the now infamous phrase "I'm gonna get medieval on yo' ass." At the corner drug store as well as on dozens of cable TV channels, the meaning of the ever more frequently used term "medieval" is at best "ignorant" and at worst "violent," "intolerant" and "intellectually regressive." If the notion of the Middle Ages as a "progressive civilization" strikes the general public as peculiar, what may we infer from the general public's notion, more than a little evident in political blogs and European editorials, that we are now in a New Middle Ages? The problem, as usual, is that it is exceedingly difficult to make intelligent comparisons between the characteristics of the present and those of what is very often an ill-defined, highly heterogeneous and frequently debated historical epoch. Those who use the term New Medievalism as a handle to discuss philological or geopolitical revolutions are perfectly right to do so. What can be troubling, however, is the fact that so many people have grabbed the same handle to tote around baggage of their own.

If we are to get a better understanding of popular notions of contemporary "medievalization," it would not hurt to take a look at a couple of recent, particularly noteworthy articles that provide insights on our subject – even if in a roundabout way. In his op-ed piece for the *New York Times* entitled "The Day the Enlightenment Went Out" (Nov. 4, 2004), Garry Wills described America's recent presidential election as a result of the abandonment of the country's "Enlightenment values." Citing the turnout of the religious right as the deciding factor in the race, he then poses the question: "Can a people that believes more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an Enlightened nation?" Setting aside for a moment the fact that Darwin's *Origin of Species* came out in 1859, we have to admit that questions like these cause a medievalist's ears to perk up. Of course, no one would attempt to defend medieval Western Europe as "enlightened" in a Cartesian sense (or to deny, for that matter, the presence of Newtonian physiocrats in the Bush administration), but there seems to be in Wills' query the implicit idea that no sign of social progress could have come before intellectual secularization. While we are on the subject of evolution, and before we reach any tentative "medievalizing" conclusions, we ought to consider another controversial bombshell that exploded at newsstands across the country during the same

² *Le Figaro Littéraire* 4 décembre 2003, p. 6.

month: David Quammen's "Was Darwin wrong?" (*National Geographic Magazine*, Nov. 2004). Despite the protests that this piece caused among both evangelists and the serious scholars of Darwin, what perhaps most interests us here is a set of statistics he offers regarding creationism. "According to a Gallup poll drawn from more than a thousand telephone interviews conducted in February 2001," he writes, "no less than 45 percent of responding U.S. adults agreed that 'God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.' Evolution, by their lights, played no role in shaping us." Granted, the most recent turn of the millennium took place by Eusebius' calculations about 7900 years after the Fall, but actual medieval beliefs, we hasten to point out, are in reality less significant to the question of this brand of New Medievalism than the processes that lay behind them. What distinguishes medieval convictions from those of our modern contemporaries – regardless of superficial similarities – is that medieval thinkers (most of those whom we study, in any event) tirelessly strove to refine and to deepen their knowledge. The term "devil's advocate" came from somewhere, after all. There is a vast difference, for example, between not believing in evolution in 1304 and not believing in 2004.

Or is there? (*Aguzza qui, lettor, ben gli occhi al vero...* this is the slippery part.) If the absolute line of epistemological evolutionary demarcation lies at the papal gate, we have to look into what the Church has to say. During his October 22, 1996 speech on evolution to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences ("preaching to the choir," to be sure), John Paul II reaffirmed Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) and added: "In order to mark out the limits of their own proper fields, theologians and those working on the exegesis of the Scripture [does this apply to medievalists?]? need to be well informed regarding the results of the latest scientific research." Nothing that he said in that speech excludes the belief in animal evolution (just like the type depicted in the Darwinian model) but he stopped short of saying that theories of *human* evolution should be given any particular weight.³ The line that keeps us from saying that a hypothetical, by-the-book medieval theologian (transported fantastically to 2004) would have believed in the theory of human evolution is already so thin that it is almost transparent. So, perhaps medievalism – with a little 'M' – has managed to get all the way to Stephen Jay Gould or David Attenborough... even though it has not yet reached the Leakeys. Does this mean that nearly one half of all Americans have a medieval conception of evolution? or simply that their conception of evolution has not substantially changed from the one held seven centuries ago?

Now, with regard to our research, it must be said that very little of the foregoing has much bearing. Even if the papal position on human evolution has not transformed itself much, the same cannot be said for other medieval areas of endeavor. It takes little effort to find examples of the industrious, progressive Middle Ages that Le Goff knows so well. The so-called Twelfth-Century Renaissance blossomed into that of the Fifteenth, agricultural and mechanical production à la Gimpel continue to this day, and so on. In the classroom these apparently anachronistic discussions occasionally come in handy. Unfortunately, although it is regrettably true that "les Lumières et les Romantiques" have made it challenging to convince students of the modern applicability of some medieval belief systems, the fault is not theirs alone. Indeed, just about daily we run afoul on the simple (decontextualized) adjective "medieval" — and far more rarely is it pronounced by fully cognizant, consenting adults in

³ As an interesting aside one could note that, after two years of litigious wrangling, a judge in Cobb County, Georgia, ruled on January 13, 2005 that the stickers placed on science textbooks in a suburban school system must be removed. Written on the sticker was: "This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact."

the few “authorized” currents of New Medievalistic Thought with which we began this discussion). They serve only to further current convictions that the Middle Ages really were “dark.” Not surprisingly, it is most often the bad things in our contemporary world (whether “plagues” like Ebola or SARS, capital punishment and torture, violence in urban centers, a wildly uneven distribution of wealth, racism, sexism or wars fought in the name of religion) which are pointed out as signs of a return to the “Middle Ages.” The truth, of course, is that these are tragedies that have always been with us and that there is nothing intrinsically “medieval” at all about them.

On the subject of evolution, especially considering no substantial change over the last twenty years in the Gallup polls cited in Quammen’s *National Geographic* piece, it is quite clear that the U.S. has long had this streak of creationism. No New Medievalism here. In fact, America is not even the only country where such beliefs run deep. Serbia’s Education Minister Ljiljana Colic announced this autumn that Darwinism will not be taught in national classrooms this school year (*Daily Telegraph*, Sept. 10, 2004). There are not nearly as many people talking about Serbian New Medievalism... even though the Helsinki Committee of Human Rights shortly thereafter challenged Serbia’s foundation as a secular state for their having laid down “church dogma as the foundation of moral up-bringing.” So, what is the worst thing that could happen? If the Enlightenment has not in the long run made much of an impact on America in some ways (though Abe Lincoln would disagree), *sursum corda*. This could simply be a sign that we are to await the arrival of a fresh increase in the number of students interested in becoming New Medievalists.

MICHAEL PAPIO

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST