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FIVE REMARKS ON THE CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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1. The Middle Ages are in no way a period of intellectual stagnation between the ancient and the modern worlds initiated by the Renaissance. This image, put in place by the Enlightenment and perpetuated by the scientific paradigm of the nineteenth century, stems from the ties between Republican ideology and the antireligious struggle. In reality, the Middle Ages, especially from the eleventh century onward, are the time of a fundamental conceptual reorganization. It is the moment in which notions coming from the ancient world are first rediscovered, then reappropriated within a completely different general vision, as it is centered on monotheistic religions. Yet we must understand that this centering prepares for a modernization, the heart of which is the progressive elaboration of a new vision of the Subject. In this sense, the movement that leads to Descartes is anticipated starting in the Middle Ages with the attempt at a synthesis between Greek rationalism and the disposition of Christian faith centered, after Saint Paul, on personal conviction. At the heart of the Middle Ages, then, the philosopher finds two large-scale intellectual operations: a textual restitution and a new interpretation.

2. The first operation, which is a transmission, is like a “great discovery” but in the world of thought. It is well known that this operation was first brought about by the Arabs. It took a considerable amount of work, in quite difficult material conditions. The conservation, copying, translation, and transmission of texts in itself is an exceptional adventure. From this point of view, medieval intellectuals knew to pick up matters where the erudites of Alexandria and the Roman sages had left them. We largely owe to them the existence of a textual patrimony of prime importance, in all domains of knowledge: poetry, theater, history, sciences, philosophy. Without a doubt, in the order of interpretation, they emphasized that which was closer to their mental universe, dominated by the command of faith. But they also knew to maintain precisely that which some among them were not prepared to understand, such as complex mathematical texts that were not fully assimilated in the West until the sixteenth, even the seventeenth, century.

3. The second operation is one of the most formidable hermeneutics ever attempted in History: the adaptation of a group of very complex scientific and philosophical profane concepts within a Revelation of a completely different order. The idea is that there can be a second rationality articulated without contradiction upon a primary faith. In this light, we can argue that the work of medieval thinkers, if of a different nature, allows itself to be compared to that of the classical age. Thinkers from this period, beginning in the Renaissance, despised medieval thought, as to them Greek and Latin works constituted insurmountable paradigms. When in France La Bruyère wrote that “tout est dit, et l’on vient trop tard depuis sept mille ans qu’il y a des hommes et qu’ils pensent [everything is said,

and we are more than seven thousand years of human thought too late],” he evidently was referring to some sort of origin, which is the model provided by the ancients. Medieval thinkers admired the masters of ancient thought just as much, but they could not make of them absolute models, because Revelation forced them to displace and rework the conceptual disposition of these masters to render them compatible with this Revelation. It can be argued that if the classics set as a rule the *imitation* of the ancients, medieval thinkers practiced their *adaptation*.

4. The Middle Ages are also a period in which a new relation comes to be defined between the lettered elite and the popular masses. Indeed, contrary to what happens in the ancient world, a fundamental fact is common to both: religious faith and everything that it organizes (or contradicts) in ordinary social life. The consequence is that there may exist intermediary genres between the conceptual science of the lettered and the fabric of beliefs and practices of the people. Whence the birth of romances of love and adventure, of novel practices in poetry, of a popular theater repertoire (passions and farces). One can compare this state of affairs with certain contemporary attempts in the direction of a revolutionary art. It is in fact about the production of a system of forms and a repertoire of situations that would be at the same time up to the level of the intellectual demands of Marxism, and destined for a large popular audience, including with didactic intentions. We know that truly great works of art (Brecht, certain Chinese revolutionary operas, great Latin American novels, etc.) resulted from this willed proximity between a shared conviction (a political conviction) and the inscription within a historically constituted artistic movement. In some ways, this attempt is closer to the medieval situation than to the classical situation.

5. We can thus speak of an actuality of the Middle Ages. In the world of late capitalism, we also have to propose a new interpretation of “classical” culture, and to situate ourselves in regard to a collective imaginary (film, television, music, etc.). It is likely that a new theoretical referent, a new stage of Marxism, is called upon to play the unifying role assigned to different religious forms during the Middle Ages. From this point of view, we are interested in getting to know the fundamental operations of the intellect of the Middle Ages (conservation and displacement). At bottom, after some centuries of high bourgeois culture, we are in a comparable situation to that of Western monks facing the heritage of the ancients. For we ask ourselves the same question: what to make of all of this, which is splendid and powerful, but in itself still foreign to the ends we pursue, and which we can name “communist” in the generic sense of the term.

Translated by Simone Pinet