

Introduction

The years since 1968 are lapsarian. . . . The subjective is not continuous. It surges into being, and then ceases to exist: it lapses.

Sylvain Lazarus, Anthropologie du nom

The past can be seized as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"



The modern subject was invented in the Middle Ages, such is the thesis of this book, destined to disturb medievalists and modernists (including postmodernists) alike. Both are deeply invested in the binarism "medieval versus modern," which constitutes their historiographical self-image by Othering its opposite. If the modern subject is medieval, it follows that the Middle Ages are modern, or that modernity is medieval—a troubling result either way. The self-assurance of academic specialists, their job security, and their epistemic authority are undermined by such transgressive revisions. A modernity that defines itself by unceasing change in perpetual self-reinvention projects a "Middle Ages" that is flatly self-identical under a pall of theological closure. Both images are delusional and ideologically determined.

Determined currents of critical scholarship have worked for generations to dispel that simple-minded binarism. More than a century ago, Paul Viollet proclaimed, "We issue from the Middle Ages. . . . The roots of our modern society lie deep in them. . . . The Middle Ages are alive in us."¹ More recently, Jacques Derrida recognized that "all the concepts of the modern theory of the State are secularized theological concepts. . . . One must start from theology if one is to understand them."² The disciplines as

institutionalized, however, remain largely anchored to their constitutive assumptions: the exclusive alterity of the “modern” and the “medieval.”

Modernity’s ignorance of the Middle Ages licenses its self-image and hides the revolutionary character of the Middle Ages which constituted modernity. Far from flat, stable, and unprofitable, the millennial interregnum of the medieval period *is* the revolution which cast the die of futures we tremble in. That revolution was political, taking the term in its broadest sense, as the armature of collective life. Governance divides those in power and those subject to power. The “state” is one very particular, historical form of governance. The state’s beginnings—not “origins,” but a specific set of transformations that shift the course of history—are found in France and England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: that is when the first foundations of what would become “modern” states begin to take a recognizable shape.³ But state-formation is only a somewhat more visible aspect of the transformation in European civilization. The eleventh-century investiture controversy was, in effect, a “Papal Revolution”⁴ which reformulated relations between religion and secular life in “a mighty iceberg of change,”⁵ a disengagement whose release of lay energy and creativity has been compared to a “process of nuclear fission.”⁶ That energy was channeled into disciplinary rationalities of culture and politics, transforming the remains of the Roman Empire into the states, the cultures, the institutions of the so-called early modern period: from the Renaissance on, the West builds on the labors of the Middle Ages, equally monumental and monstrous.

“Literary” texts and historical practices from the Middle Ages participate in the cultural invention of the subject as part of the political invention of the state.⁷ This concept of subjectivity is a far cry from one that flattens out Emile Benveniste’s paradox: “Is ‘ego’ who says ‘ego.’”⁸ Against a long continental tradition of philosophical subjectivity, Benveniste asserted a speaker’s capacity to posit himself as a linguistic subject by the simple act of saying “I.” His paradox resolved nothing: it posed an enormous challenge to thought, largely ignored. Reducing subjectivity to the use of “I” denies subjectivity to any discourse—a figure of irony, Chaplin’s silent muster of innocence, Buster Keaton’s stone face, a portrait by Paul Klee—lacking the verbal subject “I,” which is patently ridiculous. If

A poem dreams of being written
Without the pronoun “I”⁹

does it forswear subjectivity, or render it as paradox? The linguistic subject is equivalent neither to the subject of consciousness nor to the subject of action: it is frequently their simulacrum. The centrality of language remains uncontroverted: society does not exist without it. But if language is essential to collective life, it is as the condition of possibility for heterogeneous constructions that exceed language itself. Nor does subjectivity reduce to identity, as in current identity politics: on the contrary, contradictions between subjectivity and identity are frequent—as the ensuing pages will show. Contradictions produce the political subject, sometimes by challenging identity.

The subject, collective or individual, exists in passive and active phases. In the passive phase, it is the object of manipulations of parents, its own unconscious, and a world of representations that gather ideological value. This first, “objective” phase produces an aporetic image of self-mirroring,¹⁰ which is both undermined and overdetermined by the later entry into a symbolic domain of language and culture. This passive phase has been extensively explored from the psychoanalytic quarter: Lacan himself, after him Žižek and others, tease out with disturbing mastery involutions of subjectivity which reduce textuality to symptomatic formations. The second phase of subjectivity extends the symbolic to the incorporation of social identities and ideologies. It recognizes the efficacy of the unconscious, but encounters the demand of social action as the world springs the necessity of making choices—often binary and framed by external conjunctures over which the subject has no immediate control—on the individual. This is the necessity of narrative, slighted by generations that, after May 1968, disengaged themselves from social action.¹¹ Faced with such choices, the individual, as agent, wagers his or her subjectivity, an ongoing dialectic between subject and history with ideology as mediating term.¹² An alternative mode of subject-creation, explored by Foucault, is that of discipline, whose early stages were “ethical,” more recently transformed by the development of specialized professions.¹³ In both cases—ideology and discipline—the repetition of choices and actions may construct the identity of a habitus.

In historical societies, ideologies and disciplines are multiple: the individual is a site of multiple traversals, constituted in the disruption,

breaking, and reknitting of multiple semiotic strands,¹⁴ his or her subject position(s) targeted by multiple interpellations.¹⁵ In that manifold, interferences and contradictions necessarily occur.¹⁶ Individual encodings are interrupted, requiring choices among the multiple interpellations: “A subject is that term which, submitted to the rule which determines a place, punctuates it with the interruption of its effect.”¹⁷ It is in that interruption, in that disjunctive moment, when interpellation fails,¹⁸ and the subject is forced into excess over its cause,¹⁹ that subjectivity is attained and that text is formed, in the burdensome, enforced freedom of making choices. The identity of post-Althusserian theory of the subject is the subject’s nonidentity. Nonidentity in two senses: not the same as “identity,” and not identical to itself. Furthermore, the contemporary discovery of subjectivity’s fragile nature makes of it more a goal, a hope to be attained, than the stable ontological assumption of political life: subjectivity is always under construction. It is constructed by the choices the subject makes as narrative, historical agent.

It is this latter, active phase of the subject that medieval texts explore. The degree to which they respond to psychoanalytic readings has been established by critics from Roger Dragonetti to Alexandre Leupin.²⁰ The validity of the enterprise calls for a major theoretical discussion, not broached here, regarding the presumed permanence of psychic structures across historical and cultural divides, and the elision of textual structures that define textuality itself. From this quarter, serious examination of the ways the unconscious and political life impinge on each other is rare. In the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan more than once alludes to the threat of nuclear self-destruction, frighteningly present at the time of his seminar, neither as a political issue nor as a discourse to be psychoanalyzed, but as an obscenity dismissed in horror and disgust: a civilized, psychoanalytic “Othering.” Nor, in a work that claims to be an “ethic,” is there any guide to choices of action other than loyalty to one’s own desire: both modern and medieval history demonstrate how that principle can lead to ultimate horrors.

The constitution of the subject is an integral part of medieval state-formation, with its increasing reliance on ideology and discipline. The beginnings of “modern” practices of governance are examined in the chapters titled “Representation”: they spearhead a more encompassing change, the elaboration of a disciplined civilization, of which subjectivity is one pre-

cipitate. Aspects of the process are found in medieval history, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, even a protolegal anthropology. Above all, however, practices modernity categorizes as “literature”—a modern institution with no medieval equivalent—do the ideological work of their polity in exploring and constituting subjectivity by providing performative models of human comportment. They do so in a manner that retains “deniability”: works of fantasy and fiction, they are easily appropriated by the category of ornamental entertainment, “the aesthetic” of modernity. As such, they have formed the traditional canon of French medieval “literature.” Texts were selected out of the mass of documents in the course of the nineteenth century’s philological explorations of European archives, and canonized because of their undefined pertinence to the researchers’ subjective constitutions. The “literary” history of the Middle Ages told the story of how we came to be what we are, in strange disguises. It is a story we (do not) recognize: some sense of its import glances across our reading, but only peripherally, insofar as its meaning escapes us. The canon is an uncanny allegory of the state and its discontents, which grips us, often against our taste and will, because it tells the story of our coming to the untenable site of subjectivity we occupy. The canon is an allegory whose code has been misplaced, or, more precisely, repressed.

Some medieval texts participate in the canonic “national allegory” Fredric Jameson has noted.²¹ As with the Third World, not all texts do so:²² some develop narrative figures of self-reflexivity superficially exclusive of any political problematic;²³ others radiate complaisance in the pleasures of the Same.²⁴ Texts, however, are strange, unpredictable, polyvocal subjects, as constituted in contradiction as the human subjects who produce them. Contemporary speculations on theory and method approach the sophisticated semiotic sense of medieval thinkers and writers, allowing those medievalists who engage them to reveal, not only unsuspected productions of medieval meaning, but a “New Middle Ages.”²⁵ A new subjectivity is generated by textual and political practices, starting in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, initially affecting only a few and slowly spreading as the center of a new mode of collective life—a culture and “civilization”—of which state structures are the central armature.²⁶ To recapture the flickering evanescence of the subject of freedom for a material and agonistic historiography is the goal of this book.

One lesson of textual awareness is the inherent polysemantics of textuality. All texts, by their nature, are compounded of multiple structures, which do not necessarily deliver unitary meaning neatly wrapped to passive readers. On the contrary, they require active intervention, a self-aware construal of meaning from a historically and theoretically informed reader. We do not garner preestablished meanings, we construct them. Insofar as the cultural autonomy and integrity of the text are respected, we construct its meanings in an overt act of structural interpretation. The pretensions of historicism—to recapture a single, “correct” meaning located “within” the text and verifiable in its own time—are beside the point. No reading totalizes the import of a book: at most, we approach a reasonable and a partial adequacy, well short of closure. Readings contemporary to the text—when available—enjoy no absolute privilege: they are almost as incomplete, as subject to criticism *vis-à-vis* the text, as modern readings. This book performs an initial survey, no more: far more texts are to be read in its optic, both as furthering political subjectivity and as eluding that proffered function. Furthermore, the subject is protean and takes a variety of textual forms. Rather than repetitions of a single formula, the following pages explore different medieval “takes” on the processes of subjectivation, in their relations to violence, voice, and textual structure.

Subject and text, state and civilization, are profoundly ambiguous icons of problematic interdependences. This book does not sing their praises: it views them with suspicion, convinced of the profound continuities between the medieval period and modernity, between violence and the state-form.²⁷ The discourse of this work, constantly nagged by theory, is both semiotic and historical: its focus is on praxis, both textual and historical. If society’s history is “read” as text, it must always be with its *hors-texte* in memory. The weight and strain of muscle and bone, of blood and the single eyelash, may not be perceptible outside a *texte*: they are not adequately accounted for as text. Those suspicious icons—subject, ideology, text, state, and civilization—have effectivities: they exist. They require examination as objects of historico-theoretical research, an examination impelled by the multiple passions of beauty, justice, and knowledge, as part of an effort to deal with a world increasingly seductive and terrifying.