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A Western Medievalist's Perspective

Professor Hurwitz pleads eloquently that medievalists overcome their myopic ethnocentricity and enter a new phase of comparative, horizontal studies in which "all ethnics are created equal." Although by temperament and training (my advanced degrees are not in history but in medieval studies) I am in favor of integrated, horizontal research, I believe that such efforts are valuable only as parts of larger, vertical studies which emphasize continuity and change over time. Thus while supporting the plea for enlightened comparative work, I must defend the priority of vertical history. Moreover, I contend that when properly understood vertical history suggests a solution to the sorry state in which medieval studies in America finds itself today—a state induced largely by a type of horizontal history which spawns both the sort of old-fashioned ethnocentricity Professor Hurwitz rightly condemns and other, more pernicious evils.

Medieval studies in America is beset by three serious problems, each aptly symbolized in the name of our professional journal, *Speculum*. The first is the temptation to gaze into the mirror and see only the reflection of Anglo-American culture in which everything east of Dover is foreign and everything east of the Elbe is howling chaos. This type of narcissism, which is the principal concern of Professor Hurwitz, is at fault not so much because it asks questions about a particular cultural tradition, but rather because too often its point of departure is also its destination. Historical inquiry always begins in a particular present and historians pose questions which are inescapably formed by the societies in which they live. Soviet historians and American historians will quite naturally ask different sorts of questions about the past, not merely because of ideological differences but because they live in different societies which have different concerns about their past. Problems arise only when historians seek answers to their questions by projecting onto the past the prejudices, categories and values of their present. Our proper task is rather to recognize that in other times and other places people have structured their worlds in ways very different from our own: that Kiev was once closer to Paris than was Corduba. As we try to understand why the past was so different and how the present emerged from it, we naturally begin to recognize the horizontal unities and similarities which made the past so different from the present.

The narcissism which tries to see the past as a reflection of the present might be less harmful were it not accompanied by a second sort of mirror gaz-

ing—a wrong sort of “interdisciplinary study” which tries to minimize differences in time, space, social and economic reality in order to present a “holistic view” of the Middle Ages. Radical syncretism, which tries to make everything in the West for 1,000 years intelligible in terms of a single world view uniting peasant and king, Sicilian and Swede, Merovingian and Valois, distorts more than it enlightens. Moreover it is anti-historical since it denies that most essential characteristic of history, differential change over time. We medievalists make this anti-historical bias easier on ourselves by avoiding problems of continuity with total history: we talk almost exclusively with each other, not with classical historians, early modernists or (heaven forbid!) contemporary historians. In additions, we tend to concentrate on specifically “medieval” topics rather than on questions and problems in historical change and evolution.

The final and perhaps most serious defect in much of the medieval scholarship seen in America is that, like the image in a mirror, it is essentially an uncritical one. Not of course that historians should be critical in the sense of judgmental—our task is to understand the past, not to judge it. Nevertheless just as a mirror can reflect only surface appearance, much of American medieval work attempts to describe the past from within the religious, social and cultural categories of that past (a laudable preliminary step), but not to expose the underlying structures, tensions and dynamics of medieval societies and cultures. We become proficient at paleography, diplomatics, iconography, philology, and other “auxiliary disciplines” that help us look into the mirror, but our uncritical fascination with what we see too often leaves us proficient antiquarians, not historians.

The solution to these problems lies in approaching the Middle Ages as part of a continuous past, not as an age set apart from the rest of human history. We must ask critical questions of this past and follow our sources as they reveal to us a world in which political geography, social structures and cultural forms were greatly different from our own. Just as Professor Hurwitz’ own studies in Carolingian theology led her first to Constantinople and then to Kiev, we must be ready to discard our conceptions about the configuration of the world and accept the surprising results of our inquiry. Moreover, we must search out the points of stress, the internal tensions, the inconsistencies and oppositions in this medieval world which account for the slippage, the historical change, which ultimately unites all past in a continuous process. All of us, not only Westernists, Byzantinists, Slavacists, and Islamacists, but also historians of all periods must recognize that our work is in reality the same: we are all historians united in our effort to understand and interpret human history.

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