

REZENSIONEN – BESPRECHUNGEN – COMPTES RENDUS

ATUCHA, I./CALMA, D./KÖNIG-PRALONG, C./ZAVATTERO, I. (eds) : *Mots médiévaux offerts à Ruedi Imbach* (= Textes et études du Moyen Age 57). Turnhout : Brepols 2011. 797 p. ISBN 978-2-503-53528-9.

A Festschrift does not fill one with confidence—one expects a cobbled-together assortment of second-rate articles, with a pious, even hagiographical dedication to the Festschriftee stuck on the front. Who would put his best work in such a volume? It is a relief, then, that *Mots médiévaux*, while it appears to be a Festschrift, assembled in honour of the eminent mediaevalist Ruedi Imbach, is, in its substance, nothing of the kind. If Imbach is its *causa efficiens*, its *causa formalis* is something else entirely. But what?

MM contains some 70 articles—two short of the magic mediaeval number—in five languages, arranged alphabetically, each on a word or phrase of some significance, often oblique, for mediaeval thought. (The editors are too narrow in their own use of the word ‘philosophie’.) Given its size and ordering, *MM* looks like an encyclopaedia, but it is not constrained by the same demands: it does not aim to be exhaustive, or even representative, in its coverage. This is just as well, since printed encyclopaedias are in the process of being rendered obsolete by the internet. Systematised and indexed articles are the best way to arrange information in a linear medium such as print; but they cannot, in the end, compete with Google and other web resources. *MM* wisely opts instead for close reading, and for the creativity of individual interpretation. The editors acknowledge this in their *avant-propos*, shrewdly brief:

Plutôt que d'établir la carte d'un territoire à une échelle déterminée, ces *Mots médiévaux* permettent ainsi de tracer des trajectoires à travers l'histoire de la philosophie médiévale, à différentes hauteurs de vol. Les plans de vol se dessinent sur une carte du ciel nécessairement fragmentaire et mouvante. (10)

This liberty is a key to the book's nature. Its articles function not as interlocking *tesserae*, but as little pastilles of thought and discovery, each seeking to strengthen our grasp of a small piece of historical meaning. Despite the book's title, the editors write that each article concerns ‘une *notion* singulière ou trop peu étudiée’ (9). Is *MM*, then, a contribution to mediaeval *Begriffsgeschichte*—a set of additions to the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*?

Some articles do gesture in that direction. Aurélien Robert takes ‘fascination’ from the glances of fabulous animals, through the *Glossa ordinaria*, Avicenna's concept of the imagination acting at a distance, Albertus Magnus on demonic magic, Roger Bacon on natural magic, the amorous gaze in medicine and poetry, to the Neoplatonic iterations of Ficino. Robert also notes the concept's survival into the eighteenth century. In fact it survived even into the next: in 1838 the famous physician Étienne Esquirol would describe sorcery as a ‘mode de fascination’ operating ‘sur l'imagination en

l'excitant et la fixant sur des évènements promis et désirés'.¹ Robert's article, despite its nods to Agamben and Freud, would have benefited, even from a mediaevalist's perspective, from further reflection on the endurance of the old concept in a new intellectual landscape.

If a number of pieces in *MM* attempt to cover a broad sweep of mediaeval thought, others adopt different approaches. There are idiosyncratic entries on missing words and concepts ('anonyme', 'plagium'), considerations of absence. Other articles focus on individual authors, singled out as points of rupture and illumination: thus we have entries on 'imago dei' in Henry of Lübeck, 'obumbratio' in Aquinas, 'magia' in Albertus Magnus, 'esse' in Nicholas of Cusa, and so on. The tension between word and concept is handled with care. Jean-Luc Marion on 'substantia' is especially good: like an early Derrida he traces the apparent contradictions in Augustine's uses of the word, undermining the supposition of metaphysical continuity.

Dominique Poirel is similarly attentive to *symbolum*, as it comes to Hugh of St Victor from Eriugena's Dionysius. It has recently been argued that little Dionysian theology rubbed off on Hugh;² Poirel, by contrast, suggests that Dionysian concepts helped Hugh to understand his *own* thought (715). For this to happen, the humanist Hugh had to reconfigure the alien *symbolum* in more familiar Latin language: *collatio*, *exemplum*, *forma*, *figura*, *similitudo*, etc. (In this he may be contrasted to later Dionysian commentators, such as Robert Grosseteste, who preserved a strict Latin equivalent for each Greek term, concerned more with fidelity to the original than with the elaboration of new thought.³) Hugh's *symbolum* has been well studied;⁴ Poirel's contribution, like Marion's, is disruptive, noting misreadings and incoherences in the reception. Of particular interest is Hugh's grappling with the two movements of Dionysian symbolism, from divine illumination to sensible objects, and back again, each tendency always in balance with the other.

Alongside such weighty subjects are found slenderer topics—neologisms and *hapax legomena*—which require a different sort of approach and analysis. John Marenbon deals astutely with the fragility of 'philosophia', a word at the periphery of lexical reality. What does it take for *philosophia*, the feminine form of a well-attested adjective meaning 'philosophical', to become *philosophia*, an unattested noun meaning 'female philosopher'? The significance of context is illustrated by Marenbon in a footnote:

Although *Aspasie philosophe* [in one of Heloise's letters] could in theory mean 'the philosophical Aspasia', in the second usage of *philosophia* (*praedicta philosophia*), the word must be a noun and it is fairly clear that the noun is intended the first time too. (549, n. 10)

¹ ESQUIROL, É.: *Des maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal*. 2 vols. Paris: Baillière 1838, vol. I, 506.

² ROREM, P.: 'The Early Latin Dionysius: Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor', in: COAKLEY, S./STANG, C.M. (eds): *Rethinking Dionysius the Areopagite*. Oxford: Blackwell 2009.

³ MCEVOY, J.: *The Philosophy of Robert Grosseteste*. Oxford: Clarendon 1982, 80–5.

⁴ CHENU, M.D.: *La théologie comme science au XIII^e siècle*. Paris: 1957, 174–78; W. Wetherbee: *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century*. Princeton: UP 1972, 57–60.

The concept's precariousness is evident: had there been no 'praedicta philosopha', Marenbon might have conceded that 'philosoph[a]' was simply the adjective: reading favours *consuetudo*. But then there would have been no female philosopher at all! His argument turns on the subtle twisting of language into a new form, for the purpose of special communication—a concept of peculiar charge in the context, the female philosopher, revealed to us by a *lectio difficilior*.

Olaf Pluta's article on 'atheism' is less successful. Atheism is one of the most problematic cases for the historian of ideas. Kurt Goldammer's approach in his *Wörterbuch* entry is significant, opening with an examination of the concepts actually denoted by the (early modern) word *Atheismus*—one of which was *not* the lack of belief in God. As he puts it, the use of the word 'ist mit der Überzeugung verbunden, daß der Gottesgedanke ein sicheres Besitztum der menschlichen Vernunft sei'.⁵

Pluta deals not with the word 'atheism' or its Latin cognates, but with the concept in its modern sense, citing as a 'simple indirect proof' (!) of pre-modern atheism contemporary legislation against blasphemy, and William of Ockham's claim that 'many doubt the existence of God'. Leaving aside the insuperable problem of testimonial bias on this issue, amply documented in the book he himself cites,⁶ Pluta discusses two 'atheists' portrayed in the *Decameron*, the one a sinner and blasphemer, the other Guido Cavalcanti, the Epicurean reputed to have disproved the existence of God. He treats these stories as clear windows onto the mediaeval mind, loading Boccaccio's light satires with a great deal of philosophical baggage. But this is unmerited: neither figure is, in any documentary sense, an atheist. The first should be analysed as a heretical sinner, the other as an intellectual distrusted by the 'gente volgare'—the respective objects of satire. The reading of literature, we feel, must be grounded first of all in the aims and conventions of literature itself. Pluta avoids misreading the word 'atheist', but errs in seeking a chimaera.

Some articles, finally, are not about specific terms or concepts, but resemble instead little poems of meaning, hanging on a word or phrase. Iñigo Atucha's early entry, 'Alto mare aperto', is a case in point. Atucha shows us Primo Levi, incarcerated in *Se questo è un uomo*, recalling snippets of Dante to his French co-worker. In this process of recollection, encapsulated in the 'high open sea' of *Inferno* 36.100, Dante's Hell threatens to become the Monowitz camp at Auschwitz. The passage is known in the scholarship; but Atucha reflects on the *tentativeness* of Levi's assimilation: 'Le narrateur demeure au seuil de l'analogie, qu'il n'apprehende que d'une façon obscure et intuitive' (53). Analogy is always a temptation to man, but Levi recognises too its dangers. It is a small point, left to dangle at the end, as in a poem. But it speaks again to Hugh struggling with the two move-

⁵ GOLDAMMER, K.: *Atheismus*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 13 vols. Basel: Schwabe 1971–2007, vol. I, col. 596.

⁶ MINOIS, G.: *Histoire de l'athéisme: les incroyants dans le monde occidental des origines à nos jours*. Paris: Fayard 1998, 68–107.

ments of the Dionysian symbol, and, more broadly, to all the mediaeval thinkers of *MM*, seeking to reconcile the meanings of past and present. It speaks, finally, to the book itself, which is, at the last count, one more layer of interpretations, destined to be creatively misread by generations of future scholars. *MM* is no promptuary of information—a reference work of no great utility. It is rather an invitation to thought, broken and incomplete, upon the broken and incomplete thought of the Middle Ages.

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