Response Essay

The postmedieval project: Promise and paradox

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Historical studies have always been justified as informative for the present, but usually so within a framework of thinking that views the modernity in question as almost by definition in some kind of advance – epistemologically, socially, culturally – on what has gone before. From this point of view, the education in studying history is conceived to consist in the light it can shed on the sources and quality of that relative progression. Today, however, the logic of postmodernism, if we take it seriously, would seem to demand a shift of optic, a somewhat different type of reflection on the significance of the past for the present. For associated as it is with the subversion of the idea of social progress and historical development, the postmodern critique of the grand narratives of human amelioration must also invite reconsideration of the value and stature of the past. No longer automatically conceived as a relatively primitive staging post en route to some higher telos or more sophisticated stage of human understanding and self-realization, that which has gone before can be revisited not only as a source of instruction on the present, but also as existing in some kind of intellectual and developmental parity with it. In the light of the contemporary crisis of scientific rationality, pre-scientific narratives or forms of understanding can from this point of view be invested with new insights; older ways of thinking may be charged with correcting the mistakes or deficiencies of contemporary prejudice; categorizations and conceptual divisions that in the perspective of a classic liberal humanism were deemed perverse or fantastical or
simply confused offer themselves as potential sources of a postmodern and, as it is said, ‘posthuman’ enlightenment. At any rate, and to put the point more abstractly (and perhaps also more accurately because more modestly), once confidence in the Enlightenment discourses of human identity and historical ‘progress’ has been eroded, the pre-Enlightenment past can no longer be so readily judged as less cognitively informative or culturally advanced.

Where, then, does postmedieval fit in to this picture? To what extent has this overall theoretical perspective provoked its ‘postmodern’ engagement with the pre-modern past, or is viewed as justifying its particular forms of reflection? On the basis of my reading of the contributions to the inaugural issue, I have to say that I am not entirely sure, and I certainly would not want to impute its general historical optic to the editorial team as a whole without further qualification. But I have been struck by the way in which the philosophically intriguing, though often also quite paradoxical, dimensions of such a framework of thinking have continually surfaced in my reading of postmedieval. For the very idea of the past as lending insights on the present reintroduces the notion of an amelioration or telos, whether conceived as social improvement or advance in knowledge, that closer comparative scrutiny of the past can help us to attain in the future. It introduces, in other words, something of the developmental framework of thinking whose critique, I have suggested, provides the underlying rationale for the new kind of historical engagement. There is also the further paradox, or danger (one, I suspect, that will particularly exercise more orthodox historians and cultural theorists), that in the eagerness to make the past present or map the present in the past, one too readily overlooks the specificity, hence the differences, in the contexts and objects of study.

A project of this kind, then, is likely to be met with some caution by all those scholars who remain skeptical about any kind of Foucaultian re-casting of the historical task – and perhaps especially so in this instance given that the specific historical period of reclamation is the Middle Ages, a period that has traditionally been regarded, if not as a ‘dark ages,’ certainly as bereft of, and superceded by, the forms of illumination that were introduced in the historical sequel. Moreover, questions of relative humanist enlightenment have a particular relevance to the inaugural issue of postmedieval, given its focus on discovering or forging links between contemporary posthumanist theory and medieval literary and/or religious discourses on selfhood, the body, sexuality and human–animal relations. For there is always a risk that in focusing on what is complementary in medieval thinking to a posthumanist outlook, one turns a blind eye to everything that is less so – to what remains narrow and bigoted and committed to false naturalizations of gender and social hierarchies. (To make the point is, of course, to invoke precisely the Enlightenment framework of thinking about human development that the posthumanists have sought to
deconstruct. But we should note, too, that there is the further paradox at the heart of the ethico-political project of this deconstruction, given that the more complex and flexible forms of personal fulfillment that it seeks to open up around issues of self-expression, gender, sexuality, disability and so forth, have, in truth, much more in common with the Enlightenment project for selfhood than with any prior legacy.)

It is, then, I suggest, for all these reasons, a bold and controversial move to presume that medieval culture will complement, or be mirrored in, or provide a resource for, some of the more radical forms of cyborg thinking and representations of the ‘human’ that are currently being formulated within the Western academy. But there is also much to recommend in an ambition of this kind, not least because of the interest of the debates it is likely to provoke, and the new light it can bring to bear on medieval understandings of selfhood and mind-body relations. Many students of medieval studies will also surely welcome postmedieval as encouraging new, and potentially very simulating, forms of inter-disciplinary communication, while those like myself will be glad of the relatively easy access it provides to an area of scholarship with which they have little familiarity and would otherwise probably not ordinarily engage very much.

Turning now to the specific individual contributions to the inaugural issue, these are far too varied and numerous to be done justice to in a short survey. I would here note simply one or two prominent themes, and their general treatments. Firstly, as one might expect given the focus on the posthuman, there is much reflection on what this consists in, and how it relates to the ‘human.’ The most promising instruction here, it seems to me, comes from those (David Glimp, for example, or Julian Yates) who are prepared to recognize and talk about the lurking humanism of the forms of questioning of the nature and limits of the ‘human’ that are opened up through the posthumanist project. As Glimp rightly argues, posthumanism is better seen as a reimagining of what it means to be human, than as an attempt to go beyond it. Yates, too, if I understand him rightly, makes some similar point in noting that the rhetorical address of the posthuman is always, as he puts it, a call to the ‘putatively human dasein’ – a call, in other words, that makes sense only as an appeal to those already within the human community, even if it invites a reappraisal of the confines of that community.

But in a number of other articles, I sensed a real reluctance to recognize the inevitability of this form of cognitive ‘anthropocentrism’: a resistance to making clear the inevitable reference back to human beings as uniquely in a position to represent or reconceptualize their own and other forms of being. Of course, there are some very attractive discourses that pretend otherwise, including in medieval texts, as when, for example, the eagle in Book Two of Chaucer’s House of Fame offers his instruction to ‘Geoffrey’ on linguistic semiotics and the qualities of rumor. But we all accept this for the conceit that it is, just as we
ought to accept that it is a conceit to suppose that the forms of conceptual revision invited from a posthumanist perspective do anything to alter the incapacity of any but human beings to appreciate or act on the revisions that are recommended. Posthumanist representations and ontological claims, to put it crudely, are produced exclusively by and for human beings, and no other animal, *a fortiori*, no tree or stone, will ever question its own status as a being, let alone produce a commentary on Latour or Haraway or subscribe to *postmedieval*.

The resistance to clarifying these conceptual issues goes together with the suggestion that there is something falsely humanist or anthropocentric in acknowledging the species-specific characteristics of non-human forms of being, and treating them as distinctive. Yet there is surely a kind of unhappy anthropocentrism, something arguably too appropriative, in the very project of trying to deny the differences between humans and other animals. Hence my greater sympathy with those who can appreciate, and want to respect, the abyss of empathy or understanding between us and other creatures. One such contribution is the article by Karl Steel on the special attention paid to the anguish of animals in the medieval eschatological tradition of the ‘15 Signs of the Last Days.’ This for me is an exemplary piece, both in the instruction it offers for those not in the know about medieval culture, and in its illustration of the contribution medieval study can make to posthumanist cognition. For it directs attention to an interesting register in medieval eschatology of precisely what needs today still to be understood, namely, that there are limits to our understanding of other creatures – limits that inevitably constrain our capacity to communicate on their behalf, and should be recognized as doing so. The gap, as it were, between their world and our world is to be more fully respected rather than appropriatively dismantled.

These conceptual issues clearly bear directly today on many of the concerns of environmental ethics, and in this context one might note the ecological thematic running through several of the pieces. Where, perhaps, this is made most explicit is in Susan Signe Morrison’s article on ‘Postmedieval Fecopoet[h]ics.’ The topic of this contribution is the ethics of waste, and a central aim is to get us to recognize that ‘waste is everywhere and deserves, indeed insists on, moral attention.’ Yet to my mind, laudable as this initiative is in many ways, it also strikes me as itself a somewhat wasted opportunity. For almost all the attention is directed not at the ethically most problematic form of waste (waste as junk or trash, as discarded material artifacts, the waste that only human culture produces), but at waste as excrement – which from any ecological point of view is hardly much of a problem. Indeed, the world’s ant population produces more than four times the organic waste produced by the human inhabitants of the planet, but since it is all recycled, it is restored to nature. Waste understood as the unused or inutilizable remains of human productive activity and consumption is quite another matter, and must today count as one of the
major markers of the distinction between humanity and the rest of nature. All animals excrete, but only humans create waste.¹

This brings me finally to note the thought-provoking engagement in several of the essays with the issue of humanities study as a source of cultural revolution or green renewal. In particular, I would note here Michael Edward Moore’s discussion of the Arcadian contemplation of nature and its associated ideal of otium in classical and Renaissance society (if this survives in the intervening Middle Ages, he plausibly suggests, it is only in the monastery). Moore provides an interesting and sensitive historical survey. But I was also struck by his gestures to the possible role of humanities scholarship in summoning a now lost past as a way of keeping alive a promise of cultural restitution in the future. This resonates with the idea of ‘avant garde nostalgia’ that I myself have coined in the context of my recent arguments on the theme of ‘alternative hedonism’ and sustainable consumption.² By this I mean a reflection on past experience that highlights what has been lost or pre-empted by contemporary forms of consumption and lifestyle (including the dominance today of the work ethic), and thereby helps to stimulate desire for a future that will be at once less environmentally destructive and more sensually gratifying. The idea of an avant-garde nostalgia is obviously provocatively contradictory. But I invoke it in order to capture a movement of thought that remembers, and mourns, that which is irretrievable, but also attains to a more complex political wisdom and energy in the memorializing process itself. To defend the progressive dimension of this kind of nostalgia against our continuing subsumption to the pressures of the growth economy and its consumerist notions of ‘progress’ is not to recommend a more ascetic or less sensually enriching existence. On the contrary, it is to expose the more brutalizing, disquieting and irrational aspects of contemporary existence. It is to draw attention to the more dystopian aspects of the present as a way of summoning resources for the move to a greener and more enjoyable, postconsumerist mode of existence – and the evocation of past insights into how to live, and the building of bridges to the cultural resources of an earlier moment has an important role to play in this. So, in addition to all the reasons already noted, I would also welcome postmedieval for what it might contribute to this project.

About the Author

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¹ See my article ‘Waste Matters’ (2003).

**References**

