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REVIEW ESSAY

Arcana and Ambiguity in Intellectual History

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Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019)

Stefanos Geroulanos, *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2017)

> As history became a narrative of contexts as well as of actions, the moral and exemplary character of the actions related was affected … The narrative of action became a narrative of mystery, meaning not only the mystery of random contingency, but the mystery of how decision and action were framed in the face of contingency. Whether action had proved successful or disastrous, that which was exemplary about it was at the same time that which was arcane, formed in the depths of the human heart as it interacted with fortune.

The epigraph comes from the "prelude" to the second volume of *Barbarism and Religion*, J. G. A. Pocock's masterpiece devoted to reconstructing the manifold contexts for understanding Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.[1] In this passage, Pocock is addressing the transformation of historical understanding in the wake of the Pyrrhonian controversy that dominated early modern learning.[2] Reconstruction of contexts, Pocock argued, was one answer to skepticism about our knowledge of the past, but it could not come at the expense of an understanding of action and motivations. For his part, Gibbon sought a neoclassical synthesis designed to generate "narrative at the point where the exemplary became the arcane."[3] Such is the paradox of historiography as a modern craft. That which gives a historical episode its value (its exemplarity) is typically that which escapes the explanatory frameworks we bring to it (its arcana).

Written nearly twenty years later, and dealing with contexts foreign to his concerns, the books under review in this essay confront the challenge that Pocock has laid out in typically gnomic fashion. They are each examples of a kind of intellectual history that seeks not merely to narrate or describe past thought, but to explain

[1]J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge, 1999), 9.
[2]Cf. Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, 2003).
[3]Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 9.

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it. And yet each in its way arrives repeatedly at what might be termed the arcana of intellectual history. Contexts, ideas, meanings—so many competing agendas—explain only so much. When all is said and done what we are left with is the "ambiguity of conversion" (Baring, 16) in one case and "the small heterogeneities of life" (Geroulanos, 28) in the other. Both works seem to adhere to the neoclassical imperative that Pocock adopts from Gibbon; they explain so well and so fully that they finally confront us with that which resists explanation.

This is not the only thing the two books have in common. Both are essential reading for scholars of twentieth-century European thought. As to method, each trades on metaphors of network and exchange in the effort to explain the vicissitudes of past thought. Stefanos Geroulanos's *Transparency in Postwar France* describes itself as a "semiotic history" that uses the fugitive status of its key term to make evident a common anxiety traversing cultural domains. The concept is fugitive to the extent that it is by no means central or univocal, and yet it is what Jacques Lacan would call a "quilting point" that provides tension to a broad discursive fabric in which figure an array of competing notions, e.g. clarity, homogeneity, and purity, among others. Likewise, Edward Baring's *Converts to the Real* is built around a set of linkages, albeit in a more grounded way, with real border crossings and movements of intellectuals around the Continent filling out the narrative. The aim of the study is to trace the recourse to phenomenology in Catholic Europe over a period of decades, not to show how this mode of thought either is or is not essentially Christian in its commitments, but to show that philosophy has an institutional and historical character. Philosophical argument can be marshaled for a variety of competing agendas, within the church and without, and, as historians, we can make these movements intelligible in a way that is not strictly dependent upon conceptual relations that putatively inhere in the philosophical discourse itself.

Both authors are alert to the dangers of reductive intellectual history, and both seem compelled to justify their approaches. Geroulanos is keen to distinguish his semiotic history from the conceptual history associated with Reinhart Koselleck and the *Begriffsgeschichte* project. Whether he does in fact distinguish it in a coherent way has been a contentious issue in the reception of his book.[4] Regardless, the effectiveness of Geroulanos's method is inseparable from the effect of his style, which is immersive, illustrative, and cumulative. *Transparency in Postwar France* is the result of an insight that has been turned into a quest. Its premise is that, as in other aspects of Western history, the French experience provides an alternative to norms associated with liberal modernity. If transparency seems to be a positive value in many current contexts, Geroulanos's wager is that exploring a milieu in which it was a source of angst will yield a new and much-needed perspective on current moral and political desiderata.

Baring's work expands the approach of his first monograph, a study of the young Jacques Derrida in context.[5] There, Derrida functioned as a nodal point in French

[4]See Andrew Dunstall, "The Concept of Transparency, Its History, and the Theory of *Begriffsgeschichte*," *History and Theory* 98/1 (2019), 460–70; and Nicholas Heron, "A Semiotic Approach to the History of Concepts," in Giovanni Menegalle and Danilo Scholz, eds., *A Symposium on* Transparency in Postwar France, *Syndicate* 2020, https://syndicate.network/symposia/literature/transparency-in-postwar-france.

[5]Edward Baring, *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945–1968* (Cambridge, 2011).

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philosophy—a figure from the margins who came to serve as an intersection for competing discourses, from Christian existentialism to Althusserian structuralism. In *Converts to the Real*, the nodes proliferate. The study is centered on Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Max Scheler, but they are hardly the stars of the show. So, for example, the chapter on Husserl's transcendental turn is less concerned with the finer points of *Ideas 1*—though these are deftly handled—than with the ways in which Xavier Zubiri, Joseph Geyser, and Edith Stein struggled with them. Likewise, a later chapter on Heidegger cares less about his peregrinations per se than about the response of dialectical theologians and neo-Scholastics to an effort to ground whatever it is that is disclosed in theology in a more fundamental ontology.

Baring's portrait covers a range of figures who all bore some relation to the Catholic Church, as theologians, laity, or sympathetic fellow travelers, and all of whom struggled with dilemmas arising from the intersections of phenomenology with neo-Scholasticism, neo-Kantianism, and existentialism. The result restores the centrality of the Catholic Church to this moment in the history of European thought. It is incredible to think that this history was ever understood without it, such is the power and persuasiveness of his narrative.[6]

Baring begins with a case for his transnational approach, but the most acute self-reflection is reserved for an epilogue. There he writes, "Continental philosophy today is haunted by religion. Whether they consider religion as something that needs to be exorcised, conjured up, or—and this is where my sympathies lie—mined as an intellectual resource, philosophers across Europe have returned insistently to religious themes and questions" (343). It is worth pausing to consider the meaning of these metaphors. Conjuring and exorcism are both spiritual exercises; mining is more concrete. But the questions left unanswered, in fact barely posed, concern the aim of this mining operation. What are we building? What is the religious ore that would fuel the enterprise? In this aspect, Baring's approach is proximate to that of his former supervisor and collaborator Peter Gordon, whose recent work on critical theory takes seriously Theodor Adorno's idea that all theological concepts, if they are to remain pertinent, must survive their migration into the profane.[7] But to what end? That is yet to be determined. In fact, the indeterminacy seems part of the point.

And yet in both cases it also seems that we are again enjoined to seek out the rational kernel in the mystical shell. Whatever value there is in religious thought and experience is supervenient upon some prior value that it expresses. For nonbelievers this means, for example, that whatever is true in Christianity is true

[6]In considering *Converts to the Real* alongside *Transparency in Postwar France*, I do not intend to downplay what is no doubt the primary context for its appearance (and the likely subject of a future work of intellectual history): the meteoric upsurge of interest in the Catholic contribution to twentieth-century European political and intellectual history. Three other works of this moment, all likewise from Harvard University Press, are Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2019); James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); and Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge, MA, 2021).

[7]Peter E. Gordon, *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization* (New Haven, 2020). Cf. Edward Baring and Peter E. Gordon, eds., *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion* (New York, 2014).

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in virtue of something more fundamental; whereas for Christians, whatever is true in Christianity is true in virtue of Jesus Christ and all that is gathered in and consequent from this historical person and the event of his life. This creates dilemmas for intellectual historians in their efforts to "take religion seriously."[8] Charity demands being as generous as possible with the premises that ground the thinking of one's subjects in order to write a history that is as truthful as possible. But there are limits to that charity, when crossing them involves crossing a threshold that changes the meaning of one's own study of past thought. The human interior is arcane enough without the appeal to the transcendent.

On this score there is a contrast between Geroulanos's and Baring's studies that their similarity makes all the more salient. As some reviewers have noted, the Catholic element is conspicuously absent from *Transparency in Postwar France*.[9] Nevertheless, the book continues the inquiry into secularization that was integral to Geroulanos's earlier effort.[10] Likewise, Baring is concerned to assess the ongoing contribution of Christianity to contemporary European thought. But, unlike Geroulanos, whose approach is an instance of that "enthusiastic reading" that Baring discerned in the work of other of his contemporaries,[11] the author of a study of conversion takes a stance that is more distanced and almost clinical. There is irony in this. Baring places religious belief at the center of his inquiry. He wants to understand its effects, and how it both shapes and is shaped by worldly circumstances. But he does this as a surveyor, and the result is a lay of the land, or, to switch metaphors again, a secular history. Geroulanos, by contrast, writes the sacred history of a desacralized world. For he is concerned not simply to make manifest his subjects' struggles with transparency, but to advance them and show their truth in the here and now. Such is the meaning of his subtitle: "a critical history of the present."[12]

Taken together, Geroulanos and Baring confront us with the dilemma that faces any intellectual historian who wants to deliver a truthful representation of past

[8]Cf. James Chappel, "Beyond Tocqueville: A Plea to Stop 'Taking Religion Seriously'," *Modern Intellectual History* 10/ 3 (2013), 697–708; and Sarah Shorthall's essential rejoinder in her "Lost in Translation: Religion and the Writing of History," *Modern Intellectual History* 13/1 (2016), 273–86.

[9]See Laurent Jeanpierre, "Minor Concept, Major Insights?", in Menegalle and Scholz, *A Symposium on* Transparency in Postwar France; and Sarah Shurts's review in *American Historical Review* 124/3 (2019), 1156–7.

[10]Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, 2010).

[11]Edward Baring, "Enthusiastic Reading: Rethinking Contextualization in Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 14/1 (2017), 257–68.

[12]Recovering and insisting upon the distinction between secular and sacred history has been an important feature of Ian Hunter's work over the past decade. For one major statement see Ian Hunter, "Secularization: The Birth of a Modern Combat Concept," *Modern Intellectual History* 12/1 (2015), 1–32. For an applied case see Hunter, "Giorgio Agamben's genealogy of office," *European Journal of Culture and Political Sociology* 4/2 (2017), 166–99, especially where Hunter writes, "History for Agamben thus assumes the form of sacred history: the sudden appearance of events—here, the office paradigm—that are real symbols of the transcendent Being that manifests and conceals itself in them" (ibid., 168). It remains an open question whether an account that "assumes the form of sacred history" is in fact the same as sacred history, but then again the answer to such a question remains orthogonal to the kinds of questions that are permitted by the secular history that Hunter aims to write. Geroulanos's history is a "sacred history" in Hunter's optic to the extent that it intimates truths beyond the empirical facts recounted in its pages.

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thought that is sensitive to the ways in which that past thought may or may not be true.[13] One might argue that this is the difference between doing intellectual history and doing philosophy using past thought as your primary resource, which is a distinctive feature of "Continental philosophy" as a style. But even within intellectual history we expect the efficacy of ideas—their historical capacity to produce effects—to correlate in some way with their plausibility. As Baring writes, "ideas can have a powerful grip, and to the extent that those ideas lead to conversions … they also mark the point where institutional or political explanations of conceptual change break down" (17–18). This presents an intellectualist model of conversion. But it seems that we ought to hang on to a distinction between persuasion and conversion, that we don't want the latter to be nothing more than an intense form of the former. In the Christian context, the term "conversion" translates the Greek *metanoia*, which literally means a "beyond thought," but early acquired the connotation of a "turning back towards" that is equally heard in terms like repentance and atonement. In any event, it suggests an ongoing process rather than a singular event. Oddly enough, there is an element of *metanoia* in Geroulanos's orientation to the non-humanist atheism that has been the subject of his first two monographs. It involves assent and—at the risk of stretching the analogy too far—apostolate. The tension in Baring's work is of a different sort. Attraction and aversion are combined in a mode of treatment that cannot but treat conversion as something that acquires its intelligibility mainly from its tactical role in the subsistence or the subversion of a paradigm. If conversion satisfies a practical need, then it is amenable to historical reconstruction. Baring is right to note that conversions are the points where contextualist models break down, but the analogy between the worldly and religious senses of the term is imperfect, at least as it regards the historical actors in question. Marxists reject the notion that their adherence is religious to the extent that such a charge undermines the rationality of the enterprise. By the same token, most Christians presumably regard sociological accounts of their commitments to be radically insufficient even if they concede that such commitments might well be overdetermined.

"The small heterogeneities of life"

High culture in France is Geroulanos's strong suit. He is as adept with exigent philosophy as he is with *cinéma-vérité* or the machinations of UNESCO. *Transparency in Postwar France* expands and deepens the project undertaken in his first monograph, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*. That book gave a new perspective on the secularization narrative of modern European intellectual history by focusing on the French context in the years surrounding the Second World War. In effect a genealogy of negative theology as much as of French anti-humanism, the book showed how the death of God did not in fact give rise to the resurrection of man. Instead, newer and more obdurate forms of opacity abounded across domains—from science to philosophy to politics. In making this case, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist* recast our understanding of the

[13]I attempted to reckon with this dilemma in Knox Peden, "Truth and Meaning in Historical Interpretation: A Davidsonian Approach," *History and Theory* 58/3 (2019, 327–41.

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shift from phenomenology to structuralism by showing how both were ultimately premised on a rejection of any metaphysical ground on which action or inquiry might be justified. The ground of thought was henceforth to be groundlessness. A coherent, future-oriented politics could not survive such an ontological situation in which figures of erasure and evasion were definitive. Nevertheless, the quest persisted. *Transparency in Postwar France* goes further, functioning as both a sequel and a second pass over some of the same material. It offers us the history of how the very norm underwriting the process described in the previous book—the quest for clear foundations—itself came into question.

In the playful introduction to *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay made clear how ubiquitous visual metaphors are in language, especially the language of scholarship. The gambit and the study of French thought that followed showed just how fundamental the metaphor of vision is.[14] By contrast, the meaning of transparency as a metaphor is much harder to discern. As Geroulanos observes, "Nothing is simply visually transparent; transparency has no ontological standing. It is the result of a way of looking at the world and identifying objects and media" (38). Denoting both absence and presence and their alternation, it names the phenomenon of *appearing across*. In Geroulanos's telling, our contemporary understanding of transparency as a norm to be pursued by, or forced upon, governments and institutions is not the result of a process outlined in a triumphalist narrative, but instead a history of "social and theological negotiation" (26).

That history—in the French context—is the substance of Geroulanos's book, which is divided into five parts that are marked by overlapping authors and themes. Part 1 deals with what might be termed an epistemology of life, confronting issues of perception and consciousness in the immediate postwar moment. Part 2 is more political in focus, concerned with the state and areas in which debates about transparency were crucial, from the black market to public health. Part 3 deals with anthropology and the symbolic, and Part 4, "The Road to 1967," develops the themes of the previous section with studied readings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, and Michel Foucault, among others. Part 5 deals with the legacy of 1968 and gives treatments of Claude Lefort and Jean-François Lyotard that would be perfunctory were they not freighted with all that has preceded in the book.

How did transparency become an issue in the first place? After the Second World War, "The world was not transparent, because it was complex, layered, structured, filled with heterogeneity … Forms of otherness, concepts of structure, codes for information and power could hold off homogenization" (10). It is this transition, the collapse of transparency as an ideal and the move toward figures of obscurity and indistinctness, that needs to be explained. There is much cultural history in this account, but the overarching framework is drawn from French philosophy and its self-understanding. Here, the epochal role of Descartes remains

[14]Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993), 1–20. Geroulanos is aware that his book invites comparison with Jay's. The endnotes display both the debt and the distance taken. Where Jay's work offered a sympathetic critique of the tradition under review, defending an essentially Habermasian line against those seeking to have done with modernity's unfinished project, Geroulanos identifies more closely with his subjects.

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crucial. Descartes promised a foundation for philosophy in self-transparency (288–9). Clear and distinct ideas left no room for opacity. The "return to Descartes" that Geroulanos narrates shows the consistency of his method and his identification with his subjects. For the readings offered by Foucault, Derrida, and Georges Canguilhem each in its way revealed that Descartes's effort was always already obscure to itself. It's not that the Cartesian problematic needs to be rejected. It's that we have failed to understand the complex reality of the Cartesian problematic, blinded as we have been by mythologies of transparency that have us seeking clarity and distinction in a philosopher we read as committed to upholding these values.[15]

The question, as ever, is this: is the obscurity in the object or the vision? Such is "the matter with transparency" (1–28) that such a distinction is in itself indeterminate. The problem with the subject–object dualism for which Descartes is emblematic is that its nature is reinforced by the gesture that overcomes it. A chiasm or intertwining per Maurice Merleau-Ponty's late work on the visible and the invisible still requires terms to be related in such a figure. Flesh may mediate sense, but mediation requires at least two terms to be mediated. And indeed, Merleau-Ponty, like Geroulanos, forswears dialectical synthesis of language and voice, but only because "they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth."[16] For Baring, as well, Merleau-Ponty comes to endorse such ambiguity as something like an ultimate truth, a view appealing to many of his Catholic interlocutors, but which Merleau-Ponty insisted was not essentially religious.

This permanent, irresolvable reversibility is a feature limned in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, but, as indicated, it is also the distinctive property of transparency. To see clearly is to see a reality that is obscure. As soon as you see, you see that you don't see. Such was Jean Starobinski's insight in his treatment of Rousseau, which serves as a kind of exordium for Geroulanos's study. Lacan was likewise sensitive to these paradoxes, which is why he also comes in for repeated discussion. The subject is always "flickering in eclipses," in the gloss provided by Jacques-Alain Miller on the psychoanalyst's teaching.[17] Enforced transparency amounts to psychosis. Certainty—which stands for the clear and distinct, an end to the flickering—"is the province of the psychotic's fantasy of unity and uniqueness" (219).

The citations accumulate throughout Geroulanos's study, converging on the same aporia. The nature of this aporia is clearest in Part 4, "The Road to 1967." The section begins with the "Return to Rousseau," and revisions to the Starobinskian understanding of transparency. Here the key figure is Claude Lévi-Strauss, and in Geroulanos's treatment of his search for a "social ethics" (272) in Rousseau we find an indirect statement of Geroulanos's agenda: "Whereas for Starobinski the pull toward purity produced only a temporary displacement of masks bound to resurge later, Lévi-Strauss found in a different

[15]For a contemporary iteration of this view see Jean-Luc Marion, *On Descartes' Passive Thought: The Myth of Cartesian Dualism*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (Chicago, 2018).

[16]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, 1968), 155.

[17]Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (Elements for a Logic of the Signifier)," in Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, eds., *Concept and Form*, vol. 1, *Selections from the* Cahiers pour l'Analyse (London, 2012), 91–101, at 101.

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Rousseauan purity a countermodel that allowed him to explore methodologically what he denied ontologically: the possibility of a transparent relationship between human beings" (272). It is important to grasp the sense of the distinction here, not least because it recapitulates a gesture ubiquitous in Geroulanos's previous monograph. What does it mean to explore methodologically what one would deny ontologically?[18] The idea seems to be that the theorist—past or present—is able to see a network of relationships that might remain opaque to the actors embroiled in them. Transparent relations among persons are impossible because of the aporia such relations generate. Moreover, these aporia function as obstacles that direct and canalize social intercourse; such is a cornerstone of structuralist anthropology. Likewise, Geroulanos's semiotic history is not interested in transparency as an actor's category or as an interpretive category either. Intellectuals are like "competing puppeteers" whose strings of concepts often get tangled and pull ideas in directions that may have been unintended. Yet, "regardless of how they are puppeteered, concepts strung together in a given space have a temporality and life of their own … [They] do not rest among clouds, to be started at, 'contextualized,' or historicized from the 'real' vantage point of society; rather they thread together the experience of knowledge, reading, speech, and belief" (25). Geroulanos is adamant that concepts "cannot be experienced in the absence of this articulation," yet this invites questions about what it means to experience a concept, especially when we've just been told it is concepts that comprise experience, that "thread" it.[19]

What we see here is Geroulanos staging an aporia at the heart of his own method, but it is one he defends as crucial in that it yields an "essential pattern of a period's self-understanding." But again we come back to the point articulated in terms of Lévi-Strauss's treatment of Rousseau, one analogous to the discussion of Descartes. Both giants of French intellectual patrimony were foundational for modernity, albeit in countervailing ways. Where Rousseau showed the insufficiency of self-identity, Descartes promised an epistemological paradigm grounded in self-certainty, the transparency between self and reality to be gained through the acquisition of "clear and distinct ideas." Yet the result was obscurity upon obscurity, in science, politics, and life. But the aim of readers like Foucault and Derrida—and many others who returned to Descartes—was less to show the wrong-headedness of Cartesian philosophy than to display the reversibility between transparency and opacity that was already at work within his philosophy. Descartes didn't set modernity on the wrong foot; modernity is essentially aporetic (13).

Transparency in Postwar France is a work of intellectual history that doubles as a work of philosophy. It does not simply record but amplifies the signals it picks up from past thought. This confounds any terms of assessment that might be appropriate to it. How to query Geroulanos's historical understanding of thinkers when there is no difference between understanding them historically and understanding them *tout court*? In this regard, "a critical history of the present" acquires its full

[18]See Knox Peden, "Neither/Nor," *History and Theory* 51 (2012), 257–69, especially: "Antifoundationalism founds; transcendence is transcended; and Jesus secularizes Christianity. Time and again, *An Atheist* [*sic*] *that is Not Humanist* elucidates, with an exceptional rigor, a discourse in which what is ontologically denied is methodologically deployed in the discourse itself" (ibid., 262). To this list we can now add irreversible reversibility.

[19]Heron, "A Semiotic Approach to the History of Concepts," makes a similar point.

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sense. One might be forgiven for thinking there is something parochial to the terrain covered—certain segments of French culture in a relatively narrow moment of its history. But this history is us.

"The ambiguity of conversion"

To be persuaded by Geroulanos's book is to recognize yourself in it, to see that, for all its moving parts, there is something ineluctable in the theoretical position laid out. A similar ineluctability is to be found in Baring's study as well, notwithstanding the differences in his approach. For Baring, too, is sensitive to the reality of ideas, of how they can carry us places we did not expect to go—in this case, into Catholicism as much as out of it. The significance of phenomenology is that its doctrinal history makes clear a conceptual instability in the very idea of realism. This is the problem signaled by the recourse to "the Real" in the book's title. Neo-Scholastic Thomists such as Désiré Mercier were initially attracted by the "realist" Husserl of the *Logical Investigations* because they saw a prospective ally in their combat against the idealism of the neo-Kantians. Whatever else Husserl was offering, he was offering access to real essences. But phenomenology as a method did not necessarily entail realist metaphysical commitments, as the subsequent development of Husserl's own thinking showed. Or, put differently, the "real" sought via the phenomenological method was so capacious and so dependent upon the contingencies of experience that the nature of reality itself became an object of contestation, among Catholics and their non-Catholic interlocutors. A move "toward the concrete" might well only give us clarity about our *idea* of the concrete. In tracking the tendencies in the historical reality of phenomenology itself, Baring finds the substance of his history.

By the same token, he avoids any pathetic fallacy; this is realist, not idealist, intellectual history, after all. Ideas are not the agents of action or personal change, even as they might be the means of it. A case in point can be found in the treatment of Max Scheler, one of the key subjects of *Converts to the Real* and a mercurial figure in early twentieth-century intellectual history. Baring is interested in how Scheler served to reconcile competing cultural and political imperatives in the Weimar period. The tensions are expressed in phrases such as "vital faith" and "Black Nietzsche," the epithet Scheler gained after publishing *Ressentiment*, which argued that Nietzsche had everything right about slave morality except for attributing it to Christianity rather than to the French Revolution.[20] Though Scheler was never formally a student of Husserl, his endeavor was one of the first in the phenomenological idiom to expand it to social questions. Moreover, Scheler's critique of Kantian formalism in ethics and his commitment to a moral realism of values endeared him to Catholic thinkers, Thomist or otherwise, who were ever watchful for idealist mystifications. Scheler's own enthusiastic embrace of the Catholic faith in 1912 fueled this process as well.

Rather than reckon with Scheler's work directly—which, in the words of one of his translators, presents as "an artless mélange of unargued assertions and incomplete arguments"[21]—Baring traces the affinities between this work and adjacent

[20]Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, ed. Lewis A. Coser, trans. William W. Holdheim (Glencoe, IL, 1961).

[21]David R. Lachterman, "Translator's Introduction," in Max Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. David R. Lachterman (Evanston, 1973), xi–xli, at xxvii. With friends like these …

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cultural enterprises. He considers the "liturgical movement" around Romano Guardini, the Italian-born German priest who galvanized a generation of Catholics with his reminder that liturgy, the public profession of faith, was something to be lived, not merely uttered. Guardini's ideas were taken up by Quickborn, a Catholic youth organization that, in addition to seeking a more enthusiastic relation to the liturgy, also sought sanctification in its relation to the natural world. These youths were the same ones enthused by Scheler's work. A convergence of these tendencies was found in *Hochland*, which was founded in 1903 by Carl Muth in an effort to revitalize Catholic culture after the *Kulturkampf*, but truly came into its own in the interwar years.

Baring's account of this web of elective affinities is compelling, so much so that, in the end, Scheler is less of a "Black Nietzsche" and more of a black box, a species of *arcana* in himself, in which a kind of intellectual alchemy transpires. Baring comes to understand Scheler's significance by understanding his effects, and one of his main effects was the life and work of Paul-Ludwig (later Paul-Louis) Landsberg, the thinker who, prior to his death in Auschwitz, did most to advance Scheler's recuperation of Nietzsche for not just spiritual, but Catholic purposes. Born to a Jewish family, Landsberg had been baptized as a Protestant. He was never received into the Catholic Church, but his sympathies were not in doubt. Landsberg took Scheler's evident nostalgia for the Middle Ages and accentuated it. He was under no illusions of a true reversion, but he pioneered the idea that a phenomenological excavation of this moment could show the ways in which modernity had gone awry. Nietzsche—a "pious pagan"—correctly identified our needs and our yearning. But the only solutions were to be spiritual.

Landsberg's project, along with Scheler's, incurred the criticism of Scholastics like Erich Przywara for its evident fetish for immediacy and its lack of a coherent metaphysics. In this, a long-standing tension, if not dialectic, in Christian thought between Augustinian and Thomistic tendencies—existentialist decision and metaphysical construction—was restated. And this points to an interesting tension in Baring's approach. There is no gainsaying the service Baring has done his readers by bringing overlooked authors and contexts back into view. But in this case, as in others, his fine-grained approach seems to affirm a logic of ideas rather than provide a historical alternative to them.

The treatment of Scheler is indicative because his is a prime case of the contingency in intellectual history that Baring seeks to recover. Baring notes that features of his thought provided ground for elements in German culture that would succumb to Nazism, for example the preference for martial over bourgeois values, or the romanticization of nature. But of course he identifies no essentially Nazi element in Scheler's thought. So what, then, of the Catholic element? Husserl was not Catholic, and Heidegger turned away from the faith rather abruptly. (Baring suggests that Heidegger's volte-face from Catholicism had something to do with his losing the chair in Catholic philosophy at Freiburg to Joseph Geyser in 1916—a judgment no less persuasive for its piquancy.) Scheler for his part was clearly a Catholic philosopher in the years of his peak productivity. But he abandoned theism in the 1920s and there's no suggestion that he was reconciled to Christianity at his death in 1928. So in what sense is Scheler's thought Catholic? It was crucial in the conversion of Edith Stein, by her own account; it

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was formative for Karol Wojtyła's distinctive brand of personalism. But it seems to have been transiently Catholic rather than essentially so, and thus it is emblematic of the intellectual-historical problem that solicits Baring's interest. Catholicism was a medium for Scheler's thought, but was it something more? In Baring's treatment, Catholicism is rather like a culture, a particularly thick web of ideas, themes, and assumptions, whose relation to European modernism was porous. This seems true, but is it adequate? Baring suggests that overly reductive contextualist accounts are "dissatisfying" because "they implicitly deny the belief that motivates intellectual exchange" (17). But the belief in question here is not different in kind from the conviction involved in subscribing to any set of ideas or paradigm. In other words, there is nothing uniquely religious, much less spiritual or supernatural, about Catholicism in Baring's history. One of the major insights of his study is the reversibility phenomenology afforded thinkers vis-à-vis Catholicism. It could bring one to the faith or, as in the case of Jean Wahl, provide the tools for the secularization of existentialism (211 ff.).

Most revealing in this regard is Baring's assessment of Merleau-Ponty, which overlaps with Geroulanos's in suggestive ways. In the final chapter, Baring considers the parallel careers of Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur, neither of whom was Catholic, but both of whom generated work that was widely read in Catholic circles. Ricoeur's "Husserlian heresies" were uncongenial to Thomism because they rejected realist metaphysics as a matter of principle. In large part this view stemmed from Ricoeur's Protestant understanding of the Fall as something that separated us completely from the divine intellect. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, used phenomenology to articulate a philosophy of ambiguity that was attractive to figures like Jean Daniélou, a Jesuit priest and major player in the *ressourcement* movement away from Thomism and toward patristics.[22] Daniélou granted that a phenomenology of given experience will be a phenomenology of ambiguity, but insisted that philosophy could nonetheless sort such ambiguities into "different orders" (329). In his various attempts to map parallels between Christianity and Communism, Merleau-Ponty ultimately gave the last word to "ambiguity" itself. To be sure, he granted the historical reality of Christianity, but with a caveat. "To say yes to Christianity as a fact of culture or civilization is to say yes" to a host of figures from Saint Augustine to Malebranche. What is more, "historical and philosophical consciousness transmutes the struggles they sustained, at times in solitude and to the death, into the benevolent universe of culture" (341, tm).[23] Merleau-Ponty's transmutation into the benevolent universe of culture sounds an awful lot like Adorno's migration into the profane and it is indeed hardly coincidental that Baring ends with Merleau-Ponty before turning to an epilogue in which he recounts the resurgence of Thomism in figures like Quentin Meillassoux. The value, it seems, of a philosophy such as that of Merleau-Ponty's is the way in which it makes Christian thought and experience available—and intelligible—to non-Christians. The Christian mystery is but an instance of a universal arcana, unique to each individual, singular in each act.

[22]Cf. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., with the assistance of Patricia Kelly, *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford, 2012).

[23]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, 1964), 142.

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For Geroulanos, "transparency" is neither an actor's nor an interpreter's category; for Baring, "Catholicism" is, to be sure, both. But this divergence—and it is a real divergence—has the potential to obscure a more fundamental symmetry in these two studies. Pocock observed that a distinctive feature of modern historical writing is that "[t]he narrative of action became a narrative of mystery, meaning not only the mystery of random contingency, but the mystery of how decision and action were framed in the face of contingency."[24] Proliferating the contexts only serves to accentuate the mysteries, and these works are no exception. Geroulanos inherits Lévi-Strauss's notion that thinking is something that happens through us, with us, and in us—less so than *by* us. Hence it is a matter to be decoded, and transparency is something like the cipher that unlocks the matter at hand. For Baring, Catholicism provides the conceptual and institutional frame in which contingent encounters take place, but his study shows ultimately that we cannot assume Catholicism to be any more given than an ephemeral notion of transparency is.

For all their differences in style, both *Transparency in Postwar France* and *Converts to the Real* come to celebrate ambiguity as a condition in which one ought to persist. When attended to carefully, history is a story of blind spots and incompleteness and our immersion in this element is itself endowed with salutary properties. Both studies are impressive and persuasive works of scholarship that repay reading. Each offers new perspectives on familiar figures and—especially in Baring's case—brings neglected figures back into view. One is a sacred history of a secular space and the other a secular history of a sacred space. But this distinction seems immaterial in the face of the dilemma they share concerning their effort to represent the "depths of the human heart as it interacted with fortune."[25] In their ambivalence about the arcane, the real substance of intellectual history, they are exemplary works of the moment.

[24]Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 9.
[25]Ibid.

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