

The Medieval Review

The Medieval Review 11.02.06

Jean-Claude Schmitt, Alex J. Novikoff, trans. *The Conversion of Herman the Jew, Autobiography, History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. Pp. 312. \$59.95 ISBN 9780812242546.

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This review is both woefully overdue and oddly unnecessary. Unnecessary because this penetrating book by Jean-Claude Schmitt, first published in French as *La Conversion d'Hermann le Juif* (Paris, 2003), is now already a well-known and oft-cited study of the twelfth-century Latin work *Opusculum de conversione sua* (*Little Work about His Conversion*), attributed to the convert Herman, known as (according to the text) Judah before his conversion. Overdue because Schmitt's original French text, important as it is, curiously never received a review in this forum. Although the work has already been translated twice--once into Italian (Rome, 2005) and once into German (Stuttgart, 2006)--the publication of this new English translation by Alex Novikoff, professor of medieval history at Rhodes College, thus provides a felicitous opportunity to amend this oversight and give this study the attention it continues to merit.

Viewed at a distance, this book seems to be a natural outgrowth of Schmitt's earlier work, which more than transcends the formidable shadow of his mentor, *Annales* historian Jacques Le Goff. From his early treatment of medieval suicide and heresy, especially his original study of "saint" Guinefort, the "holy" greyhound (Paris, 1979), to later work on dreams, gestures, and ghosts in the Middle Ages, to his most recent essay on the history of the birthday, Schmitt has consistently addressed subjects that deal with the uncertain line between subjectivity and objectivity and that provoke methodological reflections on the practice of

historiography and the nature of intellectual history. This study of Herman "the Erstwhile Jew" (*quondam Iudaeus*) constitutes one of Schmitt's most developed interventions into the practice and implications of a historical anthropology of the Middle Ages.

The *Opusculum* is an appropriate place for Schmitt to combine the foci of his research, being at once a fascinating source for the history of "autobiography," conversion, and dreaming, and a well-spring for reflection on various methodological problems in Medieval Studies. The text itself was little copied in the twelfth-century and survives in only two medieval codices and a few other seventeenth-century manuscripts. After its initial publication in 1687 together with Raymond Martini's anti-Jewish *Pugio fidei*, it was absorbed into Migne's *Patrologia Latina* and thence slowly found its way into scholarly discourse on autobiography and Jewish-Christian relations. Following the critical edition by Gerlinde Niemeyer (MGH, Weimer, 1963), which treated the text in a positivist fashion as the autobiography of a known historical figure, debate mounted through the 1980s about the reality of the account and the true identity of the author, culminating in two, divergent studies. The first, by Avrom Saltman in 1988, attacked earlier assertions that the *Opusculum* represents the testimony of a real person or a real Jewish experience. The second, by Karl Morrison in 1992, veered away from such either/or arguments about authorship by highlighting the text's hermeneutical structure and paradigmatic form. [1] Elaborated in part as a response to these studies and an extension of Morrison's reading in particular, Schmitt's book succeeds in redirecting the terms of the discussion away from the narrow and ill-put questions of the historicity of text and author toward, in his words, "the grander anthropological questions: questions of fiction, of the dream, of autobiography, of images, of conversion as an individual experience and as a cultural paradigm" (3).

The Conversion of Herman the Jew is divided into six chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, followed by a translation of the *Opusculum* itself, along with a short related text extracted from the contemporary *Life of Godfried, Count of Cappenburg*. Novikoff's careful English translation of these primary and secondary sources--in a random comparison of various passages, I can find nothing to amend or correct--successfully renders Schmitt's study and offers an elegant alternative to Morrison's earlier translation. Also, this version of the short extract from the *Life of Godfried* provides a useful source for comparison, although a new English translation of the full text is now available. [2] Schmitt summarizes the content of the *Opusculum* itself in the introduction and then turns in the first chapter (aptly titled "Fiction and Truth") to this history of scholarship on the work. The second

chapter situates the text within wider reflections on the nature of medieval "self writing" or "monodic writing," which Schmitt argues can only imprecisely be titled "autobiography" (48). Comparing the text to other confessional models such as Augustine and Guibert of Nogent, he stresses that the question of form is far more critical to its analysis than the true identity of the author or characters. "Whoever he may be," he affirms, "Herman cannot be a single individual or 'author' in the modern sense of the words, but perhaps a *persona*, a mask, a twofold appearance" (66).

This distancing from autobiography sets the stage for the third chapter, which directly addresses the place of the dreaming in Herman's story. Schmitt underscores the unique importance of the dream narrative in the text, even affirming that the *Opusculum's* use of a dream and its later interpretation as the frame of the entire narrative seems to be without parallel in medieval sources. By placing it alongside both Jewish and Christian traditions of dream narration, he again emphasizes the rhetorical complexity of the *Opusculum* as a constructed discourse rather than a candid confession or a transparent account.

Schmitt reaffirms this conclusion in the fourth chapter, which deals specifically with the text's representation of images and the controversy over idols. Rather than mining such representations for factual knowledge--"bobbing for data" as Felice Lifshitz so aptly put it in her survey of trends in hagiography studies [3]--Schmitt situates the discussion of images and of the staged conflict between the preconversion Judah and the historical figure Rupert of Deutz in the context of the early twelfth-century foundation of the Order of Canons Regular of Pré montré by Norbert of Xanten. Not only does the protagonist Judah/Herman come to convert under the auspices of the Premonstratensian Abbey at Cappenberg, eventually joining the order. The historical Rupert of Deutz was a Benedictine monastic opponent of these new Augustinian "White Canons" (as opposed to the older order of "Black Canons") and thus it is significant the debate between Judah and Rupert staged within the text--a text produced without a doubt at Cappenberg--"confines [Rupert] to a secondary, non-determinant role in the conversion of the account's hero" in which he "comes across as a weak 'convertor' of the Jew" (144). Schmitt thus traces how the text should not be read as an account of a mentality, as it has sometimes been taken, but as part of a rhetorical thrust and parry in a local, intra-Christian polemic. This affirmation also connects with Schmitt's extended discussion in chapter five of the protagonist's baptism scene, in which the omission of the name of his godfather allows Herman to be more effectively "claimed" as a saint figure by the Augustinian canons. Such details, when paired with the work's manuscript and editorial history, support Schmitt's suggestion that *Opusculum* was

written in the context of the rivalry between monks and clerics embodied by Rupert and Norbert, and was copied and printed as part of a seventeenth-century effort to shore up the historical antiquity and legitimacy of the Premonstratensian Order.

The sixth and final chapter situates the depiction of Judah's inner struggle and final baptism in the context of other twelfth-century texts relating to the Premonstratensian order, including the biographies of Norbert and Godfried of Cappenberg. Arguing that conversion is not only an individual turning but "signifies adherence to a broader paradigm" of *reformatio* and *renovatio* in which all are called toward truth, Schmitt fulfills the promise offered in the introduction to reread Herman's story as part of a broader history of ideas about conversion. He does this by approaching conversion itself as a structure of change and reform, both social and individual. With this reading, which builds upon Morrison's earlier insights, Schmitt successfully moves the discussion away from viewing conversion as an "event" that can be pinpointed and instead sees it as "a more general paradigm of Christian culture for this period...a metaphor for all the other types of *conversio* which an examination of this text and the other documents allow one to recognize" (196). Most importantly, he shows "conversion" to be not merely an experience, but also, and more essentially, a trope of thought and a form of discourse with a deeply narrative structure.

For the study of medieval conversion narratives in particular and for medieval historiography more generally, the importance of Schmitt's study and of Novikoff's new, careful translation cannot be overestimated. Schmitt's approach marks a significant rupture in scholarship on the *Opusculum*, one adumbrated but not quite achieved in Morrison's study, which relies throughout on a questionable distinction between the text (or "thing made") and the experience that text claims to represent (or "thing felt"). Schmitt's text loosens its grip on the purported "reality" behind the text, arguing that the most important questions that can be asked do not concern that projected experience, but rather probe the historical meaning of the text's representational strategies and careful rhetoric. Thus Herman's story must be defined and studied not through a weak (and ever-diminishing) tally of its possible correspondence to extra-textual events, but through analysis of the text's own symbolic action. In short, it must be approached through a paradox, asking not "fiction *or* truth?" but instead affirming both "fiction *and* truth" simultaneously. This critical turn impacts not only how this text is read, but challenges our understanding of how history is defined and historiography is scripted. Schmitt is quick to clarify that the affirmation of history's fictive nature is not a claim that "facts" cannot be "known" but rather that history "is neither a string of 'facts'

copying (Abbild) the past nor a fiction about the past." Rather, it "is a construction, composition, discourse, or better yet, a *system of representation*" (31).

While Morrison's study arrives at similar conclusions, Schmitt's solution goes beyond the initial insights of historiography's linguistic turn of the past decades. It asks not only for a more astute treatment of written sources in writing history or a more relativized division between "reality" and "representation," but also demands a deeper, epistemological concession that allows narrative and representation a real "reality" unto themselves. "Whether one turns to hagiography, history, or literature, the conclusion, then, is the same with varying degrees: there is never any whole truth or fiction" (41). In applying this double-edged assertion, now familiar from the work on narrative and history by Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White, Schmitt does more than call his more empirical or stark-minded critical interlocutors into doubt. He also offers--and this is undoubtedly the most important aspect of his far-reaching study--a methodological model for actually reading medieval texts that closely follows the non-linear contours of medieval paradigms of time and history. He evinces such an empathetic hermeneutics to be the most appropriate in approaching such intractable texts as the *Opusculum* because "in the Middle Ages"--and as he artfully shows, in our own historiography and criticism as well--"fiction and truth are always, in some manner, partners" (42).

Notes:

1. Avrom Saltman, "Hermann's *Opusculum de conversione sua*: Truth or Fiction?" *Revue des études juives* 147 (1988): 31-56. Saltman was answered by Karl Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* and its companion translation and introduction, *Conversion and Text* (Charlottesville, 1992).
2. *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality*, ed and trans. Andrew D. Ciferni, Carol Neel (Mahwah, NJ, 2007), pp. 85-120.
3. Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographical' Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994): 95-114 at 95.