

REVIEW

Anthony Bale

*Feeling Persecuted:
Christians, Jews and Images of Violence in the Middle Ages*

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"Is it possible," asks Anthony Bale on the penultimate page of *Feeling Persecuted*, "that some medieval Christians and medieval Jews could have a readerly, imaginative world, structured around horror, emotion, affectivity, empathy and aesthetic violence, which is neither seamlessly connected to the terrible violence which punctuates the Jewish historical experience in medieval Europe nor able to be explained away by psychoanalysis?" (p. 188). That rhetorical question, which comes amidst an inspired closing polemic in a study otherwise free of historiographical hand-wringing, encapsulates Bale's mandate: to participate in the broad move away from clichés of historical writing on Christian-Jewish relations and enact a more nuanced reading, a properly "historical" reading—though he really means *historicist*—of Christian Europe's negative images of Jews and Judaism.

Across seven briskly paced chapters, Bale examines an array of late medieval texts, pictures, buildings, and built environments—most of them English—whose primary purpose was devotional: artifacts produced and employed to stimulate an ardor for Christ's Passion, to "prick" the guilty conscience, to initiate that inner transformation that turns the reprobate heart of the sinner toward God. Making up his rather heterogeneous sample of subjects are luxury Books of Hours and wall paintings in parish churches; ivory statuettes and ornamental ceramic tiles; poetic lullabies and "lives" of contemporary saints; Levantine and European crusader chapels; and Holy Land pilgrimage simulations. What unites these objects, according to Bale, is what they provided their audiences: opportunities and occasions for aesthetic *shock*, a voluntary and *performative* imperiling of the self through a virtual violence and an artful terror, experienced in the shadow of a specifically *Jewish* menace. And not only the religious ego, but the culture's most precious symbols—Christ's suffering body, Mary's virginal womb, the vulnerable Host, the innocent child slain by Herod's soldiers, relics of saints—were likewise drawn into fantasy after compulsive fantasy of victimization, abuse, mockery, wounding, bleeding and dismemberment at the hands of Jews. Why did Christian culture commit itself with such gusto to this "recreational pious persecution" (p. 11), in which a confabulated cast of Jewish Christ-tormentors, Host-abusers, boy-murderers, funeral crashers, and iconoclasts do bloody violence to things sacred, and have violence done them in turn?

Bale's provocative answer is two-pronged, and it marks his project as a product of a particular moment in cultural studies when a (new) History of Emotions is beginning to take up the unfinished business of an (aging) New Historicism. Making theoretical bedfellows of Augustine, Freud, Edmund Burke, René Girard, Søren Kierkegaard, and Elaine Scarry, Bale ventures that we "willingly subject ourselves to narratives of *terror*, religious fear and valorized images of suffering, identity under attack" (p. 12, emphasis in original) in order to elicit a certain kind of painful pleasure, one that is useful and hence edifying to the penitential Self. All those forms of

aestheticized "devotional violence" wrought by spectral Jews served Christians in the cultivation of an *affective* response to the Passion. This edifying *feeling* of being persecuted Bale elevates to a central place in medieval culture's "ideas about what it was to be an intellectual subject, to be *moved* ardently, properly and constructively" (p. 11, emphasis in original).

The second prong of the book's thesis concerns the interconnections between aesthetic shock, cognitive memory-work, and what the author terms the "perceptual *passio*" (p. 17) of the beholder who, with disciplined intent, submits to the terrorism of the image or the text. Reading the drastic emotional oscillations of a Middle English lyric that locates the devotee at the foot of the Cross, for example, Bale discovers a rhetorical strategy that turns a Ciceronian *contentio*, an antagonistic clash of opposites, into "an adversarial encounter between Jewish and Christian *rhetorical modes* which disrupts the reader and militates against progressive narrative" (p. 79). How devotional texts, images, and spaces artfully and *persuasively* structured response in the later Middle Ages is crucial to Bale's whole project, and he insistently makes "Jewish violence" the fulcrum for a tormented Christian experience of sacred narrative. Like the grotesqueries of anti-Jewish caricature (an entire chapter is devoted to "The Jewish Profile"), "Jewish violence" disrupts and disorders the associative flow of images, what Bale, following Mary Carruthers, calls "the religious and aesthetic *ductus* of an image or narrative" (p. 96). Rhetorical violence guaranteed that the *affective* devotional image will become an "affective memory-image"; and this, in turn, ensured that "the edifying and pleasurable experience of fear, violence and contrast" (p. 65) would become *effective* in the service of devotion. What the anti-Jewish animus and violence inhering in these artifacts reveals them to be, in short, are "rhetorical records of imaginative desire" (p. 185).

Several problems emerge when this hypothesis is asked to hold water against the pressures of evidence and analysis, however. Where the author engages sources already familiar to him he shows his agility as an interpreter: illuminating discussions of the so-called "N-Town Plays," the York Dormition Play (part of that town's Corpus Christi cycle), and the Croxton Play of the Sacrament form the core of chapter four, which is devoted to the disordering force of Jewish violence in dramatic narrative. Where Bale engages other kinds of sources (notably the pictorial arts, with examples gleaned largely from the scholarship he admires), he is less reliable. Visual analysis founders more often than it succeeds; conclusions seem foregone; and too often things just don't add up. For all the author's abiding concern with *rhetoric* there is precious little talk of *genre*—pictorial, functional, or otherwise—and this omission creates the impression of an undifferentiated mass of cultural artifacts, all performing the same functions for the same people. In the end Bale simply does not persuade us that his hermeneutic is equal to the task—the *enormous* task—of reconstructing historical experience in its inflected and often conflicted character. Too much is asserted *a priori*, and there is no clear sense of why the selected sources—none of which will be new or surprising to medievalists—should be considered especially apropos for testing the emotional mechanisms Bale seeks to uncover. Unlike cultural things are often adduced as *comparanda* (for example, the "structures, productions and landscapes" the author sets alongside the simulated Calvary genre in chapter six [p. 152]) or simply conflated in laundry-list fashion. Factual blunders, such as his equation of *sacri monti* (a popular Holy Land simulation) and *monti di pietà* (a communal banking and loan institution), are rendered all the more egregious by being drawn out in the analysis, undermining confidence in the whole enterprise (pp. 150-51). Readers vexed by these problems will be less tolerant of the slipshod writing one encounters here and there: convoluted sentences drenched in hyperbole, subject-verb disagreements, repetition and redundancy, nonsensical phrasing (the ritual murder victim described as "an attention-grabbing assertion of violent embodiment" [p. 50]), and too many places where analysis or theoretical exposition gets wrecked through paratactic overload. More than one

passage of conceptual or theoretical foregrounding—and the book has many—utterly confounded this reader.

Among the things one might expect from a book that approaches Christian-Jewish relations in terms of "imaginative desire" and "rhetorical mode" is a position on the question of what role, if any, encounters with actual Jews played in the forging of those fantasies medieval Christians prized as "recreational pious persecution" (p. 11). With great determination Bale rubs against the grain of the mimetic argument for anti-Jewish imagery—that is, the presumed role of images in reflecting certain social realities, however distortedly—and ardently advances the line that "the Jew" is always already a *figuration* within Christian thought and devotional practice, a representation operating within closed circuits of cognition, narrative, and memory. In the *Book of Margery Kempe*, for example, he claims, "'Jewe' does not mean Jewish, but rather that which is disruptive to Christianity" (p. 161). To a degree that will roil some readers in Jewish studies, Bale also steers clear of the whole late medieval arsenal of anti-Jewish myth and accusation: historical Jews *qua* historical Jews, the real victims of real persecutions, largely disappear from his account. This insistence stands as both a strength and a weakness of the argument. The author's occasional interpretive forays into Jewish sources seem thin and ungrounded. In chapter seven, for example, he reads several tales from the thirteenth-century *Sefer Hasidim* (Book of the Pious), which tell of Jews wanting to commission Christians to bind their books, in order to underscore that *both* Christian *and* Jewish scribal cultures were beset with "an anxious, proleptic perception of persecution" (p. 169).

Building on the fine work of Marc Michael Epstein (*Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press [1997]), Bale gives more substantive treatment to the hunting imagery inside the Prato Haggadah (Jewish Theological Seminar, Ms. 9478), teasing out nuanced metaphors of textual "starting off" and "pursuit." Such word-image composites were implicated, he argues, in "a painful kind of self-development" common to Christian and Jewish uses of hunt imagery (p. 180). Here and elsewhere, for example in his juxtaposition of Christian and Jewish accounts of the 1190 York massacres, Bale offers valuable glimpses into other kinds of shared experiences: assumptions about the vivifying power of pain, about the therapeutic value of "holy fear" (p. 10), and the crucial role *feeling* played in consolidating, and perpetuating, liturgical memories. This appreciation, to be sure, comes only in fits and starts and is, particularly in the case of the Rhineland martyrologies composed in the wake of the slaughter of Jews in the late eleventh century, largely derivative of recent scholarship. Again, the conclusions may not surprise specialists, who may be less likely than Bale's lay readers to let him shape the "rhetoric vs. realism" problem both ways. Delineating the cultural phenomena associated with an "antisemitism without Jews" is no doubt important, especially when dealing with post-expulsion England or France, or Reformation Germany. But the mutual acculturation of the kind that Bale often assumes depends on *some* degree of social encounter, whether as peaceful coexistence or tense antagonism, even if meditated by collective memory.

Despite these criticisms and the liabilities outlined above, there is an important contribution here that should not be obscured. In the end Bale's partisanship of the "self-authorizing sensations which are at the center of Western culture" (p. 180)—vengeance, pain, terror, and their corresponding forms of penitential pleasure—and his intense wariness of any historical writing that "takes an aesthetic world and treats it like a factual one" (p. 187) are extremely salutary. The hermeneutical mode he has adopted stands as a—sadly, still—necessary corrective to the reflexive psychologizing and sociologizing that characterizes the self-sustaining discourse of Judeophobia's *longue durée* across an ever-violent European experience. Yet the historicist who wants to make good on the claim to be constructing a better history must be equally wary of the opposite danger of aestheticizing the factual, a reversal toward which *Feeling Persecuted* veers

awfully close. To regard that captivating aesthetic world in which Christians staged their own victimization as a species of *social* fact, by contrast, would mean demonstrating the complex interplays of sensation and representation with the material processes of history.