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Listening with Natalie, 1975

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I first heard of the work of Natalie Davis in 1970, when I was a Research Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. It was an auspicious time. It seemed that Oxford (and even All Souls College) had begun, at last, to wake up to a wider world. As part of this awakening, All Souls College had instituted a program of Visiting Fellowships. For the first time, scholars from all over the world came to All Souls for a year. They added an exotic layer to the texture of the College. Every day, at lunchtime, they would crowd on to the cramped benches of the College Buttery—a small oval room with a baroque coffered ceiling of great elegance calculated to turn the clash of silverware and the ebb and flow of conversations into a waterfall of sound. In this confined space, the Visiting Fellows quite literally rubbed shoulders with the less exotic, regular denizens of the College. We of the peanut gallery (that is, the mere Research Fellows) listened with awe to a whole new set of conversations—no longer the usual university gossip, but the American diplomat George Kennan and the Head of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Guber, vying with each other in speaking ill of Chairman Mao.

It was through the Visiting Fellows program that American scholarship came closer to All Souls than ever before. A succession of American professors—less grand than Kennan, but no less exciting for me—brought with them a magnificently un-British zest for organized give-and-take. Lunchtime chit chat was not enough for them. They wanted seminars, workshops, discussion groups. Philip Rieff, the authority on Freud who had recently published *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, immediately formed a fortnightly discussion group among the Visiting Fellows and Research Fellows on the study of religion.¹ It was in this newly gathered company that I first heard of the work of Natalie Davis on popular culture, crowd behavior, and religion in early modern France.

I think that it was Jim McConica, a learned and deliciously puckish scholar of Humanism in Tudor England and collaborator on the History of Oxford University, who first mentioned Natalie. At that time Jim was a Junior Fellow in the Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies in Toronto (and would later become its President). He spoke with transparent enthusiasm of a new star rising across the Atlantic. It was Natalie.

If I remember rightly, Jim even circulated a Xerox (itself a very modern thing to do in those days) of her forthcoming article on “The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in

¹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

Sixteenth-Century France.”² Re-reading it almost half a century later, I fully understand the reason for Jim’s enthusiasm and the galvanizing impact of this and the other articles of Natalie which appeared in the following few years. By concentrating on the relation between elite and popular culture, and the impact on both of the Protestant revolution which shook the cities of France in the sixteenth century, she had intervened, with gusto and with quite unusual erudition, at a crucial moment of Europe’s long debate on its own past.

In understanding the excitement of these first articles, we should remember that, in the early 1970s, the debates in which she was engaged were by no means purely academic. A controversy over the nature of “popular religion” and “popular culture” had flared up all over Europe with the sudden intensity of a brush fire after a long period of dryness. It is important to recapture its heat and immediacy. It engaged scholars of very different ideological backgrounds and from all over Europe and the English-speaking world. Each group had their own “take” on the matter.

In the Catholic world after Vatican II, fierce debates on popular religion swung both ways. The drive to “democratize” the Church, by allowing a greater degree of lay participation, led to an interest in forms of popular Catholicism that had only too often been pushed to one side by the clerical elites. But this “popular” Catholicism existed largely in the heads of Catholic intellectuals, imagining happier, less priest-ridden ages of the Church. The actual daily practice of traditional Catholicism in Europe, in the here and now, held little appeal for them. They frequently attacked it as “primitive” and unworthy of a new, more progressive age of Christian worship.

Outside the churches, among more secular scholars, the search for an authentic “popular” culture—potentially subversive and opposed to the culture of the elites—was urgently pursued in Marxist and non-Marxist circles alike.

Furthermore, this was the grand decade of the *Annales*. The ideal of an *histoire totale* espoused by the followers of Fernand Braudel and by the school of the *Annales* encouraged studies of popular religion in medieval and early modern Europe as exercises in “historical anthropology.” What is remarkable about this school of “historical anthropology” was that field trips to the past were now no longer conducted, as they used to be, among “primitive” and exotic societies in colonial Africa or the American Southwest, or with reference to them, as had been the case in previous decades: when witchcraft in Tudor England might be illuminated by reference to the work of Evans-Pritchard on the Azande, or to Mary Douglas on the Lele of the Kasai. They moved to the heart of Europe, to the Dark Continent of an *Alteuropa*—of an ancient, peasant Europe whose surprisingly archaic features were revealed ever more clearly in the abundant archival evidence of the early modern period. The texture of Christianity in Europe, up to almost modern times, was at stake. Had there ever been a “Christian Europe”?

It was to these issues that Natalie brought a quite distinctive and humane voice. “The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Early Modern France” catches a scholar of the early

² “The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 41–75, now in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 97–123.

1970s at the cutting edge of the field. Methodologically, Natalie pointedly abandoned the *de haut en bas* attitude of traditional scholars to the village charivaris whose antics she conjures up with pointilliste zest all over medieval and early France and Western Europe. She is firm that these rituals were not quaint survivals from an earlier age: they were not “the *detritus* of heathen mythology and heathen worship.”³ Nor were they merely “pre-political” safety valves, allowing the victims of a rigid *ancien régime* to let off steam in a relatively innocuous manner.⁴ Rather, the charivari had a serious function as a popular court of justice, that regulated, through “topsy-turvy play”, the very real conflicts that gathered around marriage, sexual rivalry and the distribution of inheritances among young men and women in the towns and villages of France and elsewhere. How did these tensions, and their expression in the charivari, change among the populations of large cities such as Lyon? How did such pockets of social “anti-matter” find new niches for themselves as France came to be divided religiously between Catholics and Protestants? It was to these serious issues that Natalie turned the full armory of a modern culture. The names of Victor Turner and Mikhail Bakhtin were largely unknown to me in 1970. I first learned of them in the company gathered at the behest of Philip Rieff and Jim McConica in the paneled rooms of All Souls College. To read Natalie in 1970 was to drink strong wine at midday.

I finally met Natalie in the summer of 1975, first in Oxford and then in France. These were memorable encounters. On one occasion, we visited Chartres Cathedral together. Characteristically, Natalie had made contact with a priest connected with the cathedral—I’ *abbé* Guédou—who delighted in taking visitors into every nook and cranny of the great shrine. We raced up a series of spiral staircases that led from the nave into the clerestory, to come out within arm’s distance of the topmost stained glass windows. Reaching out, *monsieur l’abbé* tapped the great, glowing pane. It yielded to his hand: the complex joining of glass and lead had made it as flexible as a spider’s web. The thought that such a seemingly stable part of the cathedral could wobble in this alarming manner gave me a moment of vertigo.

But there was worse—or, for the zealous *abbé*, even better—to come. He took us into the loft, beneath the roof, where the high vaulting of the nave (which seemed so delicate from below) came together in great piles of cemented stone like beehive huts or igloos. A wooden floor stood beneath the west towers of the Cathedral, with a spiral staircase that led up to the belfry. This, for the *abbé*, was the final treat, the last mystery of the cathedral revealed. I edged gingerly up the wooden spiral staircase to fifty feet above the floor. Half of the steps had rotted through. The other half seemed to be occupied by nests defended by irate pigeon chicks. For me, who have no head for heights, it was an epic climb. Needless to say, Natalie was up and down that staircase in a moment, breathless with excitement and piling questions all the time on our guide.

On the way down, we talked about the pilgrims who would sleep in the upper floors of the cathedral. I asked the *abbé* if they practiced incubation, by sleeping in the cathedral in the hope of receiving a healing dream, as was normal in so many late antique Christian shrines. “Oh no, *mon professeur*, they were good Christians. Only Hindus do that.”

³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Next day, I met Natalie for lunch with Jacques Le Goff. We discussed, with vigor and with the greatest good nature, his recent work on what appeared to him to be a split between a folkloristic and a learned culture in Merovingian Gaul.⁵ It struck me that, for the *abbé* and for the professor alike, popular religion was something “out there.” Popular practices could either be said to have nothing to do with “true” Christianity (as did the *abbé*) or they could be valued as offering a fascinating glimpse, beneath the veneer of a clerical culture, of another, older, stranger world, from the dreamtime of Europe (as Le Goff had tended to do).

Natalie took neither course. Instead, she listened intently. In those years, it was her *compagnons* in the distant, early modern past—men, women and children, in great cities, such as Lyons, and in the countryside, at the Mass or at *la prêche*—whose voices she wished to catch. It was that sense of listening which she would never lose. Hence the poem which her husband, Chan Davis, wrote as the *Envoi* to *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*:

Born abroad, she longs for you, compagnons.
She longs to shake your hand, to share your wine.
She longs for home, four hundred years away

.....
The songs you think are vanished ...
She listens for. You speak sometimes too soft.

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⁵ Jacques Le Goff, “Culture cléricale et tradition folklorique dans la civilisation mérovingienne,” *Annales* 26 (1971): 587–603.