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Hall Bjørnstad, *The Dream of Absolutism: Louis XIV and the Logic of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. xii + 230 pp. Color plates, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S (cl). ISBN 9780226803661; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780226803838; \$29.95 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9780226803975.

Response Essay by Hall Bjørnstad, Indiana University

*The Dream of Absolutism* extends to the reader an invitation to come along for close scrutiny of absolutist artifacts that are normally not deemed worthy of our sustained scholarly attention. It questions the application of some of our most widely applied and seemingly most obvious analytical categories. It calls for hermeneutic humility in front of some of the least humble celebrations of embodied political power there is. Therefore, one would not need to be a particularly impatient, incurious, grumpy or positivistically oriented reader in order to approach the book reluctantly, looking for reasons to dismiss it or at least to dodge its challenges, rather than accepting the invitation it extends. And therefore, I am all the more delighted by the unanimously generative generosity at display in the cluster of review essays by Alain Cantillon, Andrea Gadberry, Arnaud Orain, and Harriet Stone gathered here. All four authors have accepted the invitation to think with—and alongside and beyond—the three absolutist case studies that constitute the three main chapters of the book, while considering wider methodological, conceptual, and theoretical questions. I am as grateful to the editors of H-France Forum as to the four authors for this occasion to respond to their responses and engage with their engagement. In what follows, I will focus on the ways in which the four review essays have reshaped my own understanding of the project of the book, its limitations and also of some promising directions in which the inquiry could be extended.

First of all, it might be useful to distinguish more explicitly and schematically than I do in the book the four distinct levels at which *The Dream of Absolutism* seeks to intervene in scholarly debates. Closest to the ground, it engages with the specialist scholarship on the material analyzed in each chapter: Louis XIV's under-studied *Mémoires* (chapter one), Charles Le Brun's paintings in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles (chapter two), two little-known particularly extravagant written celebrations of the king by Vertron and Préchac (chapter three). However, this scholarship turned out to be at times quite minimal and in general surprisingly unambitious; the approach was generally archival, mapping and tracking the provenance of the materials, but normally without any interpretive ambitions beyond confirming what the scholar already knew all too well ahead of the analysis (namely that this is mere absolutist propaganda, not worthy of our scholarly interest). Therefore, my book needed to intervene in a methodological debate at a second, higher level, making the case for a reconsideration of the scholarly approach to absolutist culture as such. Only then would one of my main claims make sense: that the very different materials studied throughout the monograph, although in different media and intended for different audiences, all were carried by the same dream of absolutism. But this also implied a very different intervention in scholarly debates, on a third level, on the concept of absolutism itself. I argue that the concept of absolutism, as deployed by twenty-first-century scholars, relies on a contradictory apprehension of absolutist

kingship: informed by a strictly modern demystifying rationality, the divine-right paradigm that was self-evident to the contemporaries of Louis XIV (and to the king himself) becomes invisible, even unthinkable to us. Instead, I propose that the dreamlike and phantasmal compulsions that may still draw us today toward absolutism can be more adequately probed by returning to the period's own thinking about kingship through the radically under-explored categories of royal glory and royal exemplarity. Finally, at a fourth level, as signaled by the subtitle of the book ("Louis XIV and the Logic of Modernity"), I hope to intervene in current debates about the persistence of what I call the dream of absolutism within the logic of modernity itself. In this sense, the book proposes tools to take the measure of the anti-democratic thrust and aspiration of contemporary potentates, whether in Russia or much closer to home, as put forth in the "Seven Theses on the Dream of Absolutism" that constitute its conclusion. Indeed, it is my contention that if the dream comes back to haunt us today, it is not because it erupts from a deep irrational past in *them*, in their inability to think like us, but rather because it haunts *us* from within.

Judging from the review essays, the most controversial intervention of the book is located at the second level. What does it even mean to claim, as purported by the crispest and most tabloid formulation of the main thesis of the book (starting at its back cover), that the cultural exuberance of Louis XIV's reign "was not top-down propaganda in any modern sense, but rather a dream dreamt collectively, by king, court, image-makers, and nation alike"? First of all, it means entertaining for a moment the possibility that the absolutist artifacts under scrutiny actually have something to tell us, that they are worthy of our attention and our interpretation. However, the claim is obviously not that there is no top-down component to absolutist culture under Louis XIV, but rather that the exceedingly well explored centrally controlled efforts are complemented by an important bottom-up surge: an underestimated collective participatory dimension that I explore in the third chapter of the book through the seemingly absurd cases of an encomiastic fairytale by Préchac and a historical Parallel by Vertron, and by considering the humble sonneteers who entered their work into competitions to praise Louis XIV, as organized by the same Vertron. Despite a broader reorientation towards affective absolutism in recent scholarship, there seems to be a dearth of critical categories available for thinking about this participatory dimension that I am approaching here as the dream of absolutism.[1] Considering the methodological toolbox available to the modern scholar of absolutist culture, there seems in fact to be three—and only three—possible approaches for making sense of the omnipresent instances of royal praise: the absolutist artifact is made to make sense (i) within a model of top-down communication (as part of a strategy of manipulation and propaganda); (ii) within a hypothesis about hidden subversion (a subtle dissimulation only decipherable for the select few back then); (iii) within a network of complex yet conventional courtly exchanges. In practice, scholars will often mobilize a combination of these approaches, in order to arrive at a satisfying interpretation. What is lost in the process is an important—indeed, constitutive—part of absolutist culture that is not easily reduced to a communicative, nor subversive, nor transactional framework. Therefore, evoking the category of the dream of absolutism confronts us with an uncomfortable question but one which was obviously there all along: the degree of belief in and adhesion to the dream by the court and the wider society (see esp. the essays by Alain Cantillon and Harriet Stone). Importantly, this discomfort is closely connected to our relation to this past, in what Orest Ranum memorably called "our own repugnance for Ludovician political culture." [2] We naturally flinch, cringe, recoil confronted with what to us is nothing more than servility and subservience. What else could it be?

Indeed, what else could it be? In the book, I remain close to the artifacts and seek to explore their tensions, contradictions and overarching logic with hermeneutic patience in their own language, within the early modern framework of royal glory and royal exemplarity, while resisting the temptation to explain the phenomenon away through a modern demystifying approach, as discussed above, and also while resisting the urge to too quickly make the leap to the language of theory. More specifically, this proximity is crucial for the demonstration that the same logic of absolutism is at work in what might to us appear as “absolutist absurdities” (the title of the third chapter of the book) and at the center of absolutism, inward-facing, in Louis XIV’s *Mémoires* for the instruction of his oldest son, the Dauphin, and, outward-facing, at display in Charles Le Brun’s paintings in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. In this sense, it would be fair to say that the main body of the book is more historical than conceptual, in the precise sense that it engages mainly with the concepts of the period studied. My hope is that this relative restraint in the engagement with contemporary theory and terminology will make the exploration more open and relevant to readers from different scholarly traditions, although at the expense of keeping the strangeness of the phenomenon studied intact.

Given this self-imposed restraint, it has been all the more intriguing to see suggestions from early readers of the book about post-seventeenth-century theoretical frameworks that could help make sense of the strangeness at its core: Sigmund Freud (especially Gadberry, and also Orain), Louis Marin (especially Cantillon, and also Stone), and Giorgio Agamben (from other early readers, see below). I very much appreciate Andrea Gadberry’s playful invitation to think further about the Freudian intersections with the dream (and “dreamwork”) of absolutism and even more so the intriguing reflection on the place of this specific dream in relation to the limit of the interpretable. As for Alain Cantillon’s suggestion that the project of the book would benefit from a stronger engagement with Louis Marin’s theory of representation, as put forth in *Portrait of the King*, my reaction is mixed. I do not in any way consider my discussion of the central Le Brun paintings in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles as their definitive interpretation, but rather as the opening of a serious engagement with their meaning and function. Therefore, I would very much welcome a Marin-inspired interpretation in the continuation of Cantillon’s remarks here—and along the lines of Harriet Stone’s incisive observations in her review essay (where Marin also figures prominently in the approach to the Le Brun paintings)—as a starting point for further discussion.[3] However, I am much more hesitant about the pertinence of Marin’s theory for the discussion of the wider dream of absolutism in its bottom-up dimension, which, unlike Cantillon, I think it is a mistake to reduce to something entirely transactional.[4] This is in fact the exact reason why Marin’s *Portrait of the King*, to my initial surprise, ended up being a much less central reference for my project than Agamben’s *The Kingdom and the Glory*. [5] As I demonstrate in the introduction to my book, anchored in a close reading of the entry on “gloire” in Furetière’s dictionary, there is an important paradoxical two-way pull in the politico-theological concept of glory, which is not only the splendid and fully self-reliant essence of sovereign power, but also glorification by the faithful from below (p.24–27). Early readers of my book like Saul Anton and Hélène Merlin-Kajman are entirely right in detecting at the core of my conceptual framework a stronger debt to Agamben than what I acknowledge explicitly, beyond a blanket observation that the “crucial theological impulse behind the pursuit of royal glory—which, as Agamben shows, is much more than (indeed, fully independent of) the moralist denunciation of vainglory—is still largely unaccounted for in the scholarship” on early modern kingship (p.24, cf. my remarks on the “rift in the French concept of *gloire*,” p.26).[6]

If the decision not to engage more fully with Agamben on political theology was a conscious choice, there is another less mediated lacuna in the book that the review essays gathered here have made me aware of. Or lacuna is perhaps not the right term, since I do address the *presentism* that turns out to be constitutive of the dream of absolutism at some length in the book, first by reference to an often-quoted line by François Hartog, “L’absolutisme est un présentisme,” then by exploring this intuition further in relation to pastlessness and royal self-creation at Versailles and especially as practiced by Vertron throughout his *Parallèle de Louis le Grand avec les princes qui ont été surnommés grands*. However, the way all four review essays gathered here in different ways accentuate the concept of presentism in their account of the book makes me realize that it is even more central to what I call “the dream of absolutism” than I had realized and that both individual analysis and the whole framework would have benefitted from a much fuller engagement with the concept from the outset. For, as Andrea Gadberry puts it with an elegant riff on the title of Larry Norman’s seminal *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (2011), *The Dream of Absolutism* makes visible “[t]he shock of the present.” Hartog points to such a shock in his discussion of the Moderns’ side in the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,” highlighting an “aveuglement sur le présent” which is also “un blocage sur le présent.”[7] But Arnaud Orain is entirely right in stressing that my material and framework would have allowed for a much broader and more ambitious engagement with the temporality of absolutism as such, indeed with “la théorie politique de la monarchie française toute entière.” More specifically, there are two different and competing regimes of historicity at work in the material I study: while the logic of royal exemplarity firmly belongs to the regime of the Ciceronian *historia magistra vitae*, it is everywhere challenged by the presentism that absolutism is. As Orain puts it, “La culture de l’exemplarité est sapée par le présentisme de l’absolutisme réflexif.” This is what I demonstrate in the reading of Vertron in my third chapter, but it happens throughout my corpus, starting in the *Mémoires* of Louis XIV analyzed in chapter one. In fact, it is there in my reading, for example of the “nous” through which Louis XIV reaches out to his son, but not thematized, not developed. I am grateful for this and other invitations to think further about the dream of absolutism and look forward to more conversations in the future.

## NOTES

[1] For the broader reorientation towards affective absolutism, see: Sylvaine Guyot, *Racine et le corps tragique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014); Sylvaine Guyot, “‘Un silence d’étonnement et d’admiration’: Racine, ou la discrète réticence du théâtre encomiastique,” in *L’Éloquence du silence. Dramaturgie du non-dit sur la scène théâtrale des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, eds. Hélène Bilis and Jennifer Tamas (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014); Chloé Hogg, “The King in Trinkets: Madeleine de Scudéry’s *Conversations* and the Downsizing of Absolutism,” *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies* 41/3 (2018): 355–71; Chloé Hogg, *Absolutist Attachments: Emotion, Media, and Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019); Katherine Ibbett, “Affective absolutism and the problem of religious difference,” in *Compassion’s Edge: Fellow-Feeling and Its Limits in Early Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Amanda Vredenburg and Hall Bjørnstad, “Un discours ‘de majesté’: Le sublime royal dans les expressions de l’absolutisme sous Louis XIV,” *Romanic Review* 111/2 (2020): 227–248); and, from a very different perspective, Harriet

Stone, *Crowning Glories, Netherlandish Realism and the French Imagination during the Reign of Louis XIV* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). This reorientation intersects in important ways with H el ene Merlin-Kajman’s seminal *L’Absolutisme dans les lettres et la th eorie des deux corps: Passions et politique* (Paris: Honor e Champion, 2000).

[2] Orest Ranum, *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 24; quoted p. 14n18.

[3] See in this regard my inclusion of a key insight from Marin in his interpretation of F elibien and Le Brun (p. 133).

[4] Therefore, when Cantillon asks “ne faudrait-il pas plut ot consid erer ce r eve collectif comme un syst eme d’ changes parfaitement asym etriques... ?” my answer would be to respectfully decline this invitation. I also wonder whether “a system of perfectly asymmetric exchange” isn’t already something quite different from a regular transactional system, in need of different analytical tools.

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[6] See the perceptive review of the book by Saul Anton in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 55/4 (2022): 571-573. I am grateful to H el ene Merlin-Kajman for sharing with me her paper, “ loge, honneur, gloire” (conference, “Usages de l’ loge (XVIe-XVIIIe si cle): Entre crise et renouvellement,” Sorbonne Universit , Paris, June 2-4, 2022), where she puts the framework of my book to the test of the extreme and perplexing case of royal praise found in the texts by Mme de S vign ’s exiled cousin, Roger de Rabutin, comte de Bussy. My response essay here is indebted to Merlin-Kajman’s analysis in more ways than I can acknowledge.

[7] Fran ois Hartog, *Anciens, modernes, sauvages* (Paris: Points, 2005), p. 259; quoted and analyzed in detail p. 158.

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