Ca. 1400:

Post-traumatic Narratives: Nominalism/Totentanz/
Polyphony/Perspective

18 September 2007
Week 03 - Lecture 01
Fact: plague “invaded” from China
Fantasy: Jews – the margins -- poisoned wells of Europe from within…

“The Plague, SARS, and Gay Rights”
http://www.familyresearchinst.org/FRR_03_05.html
Cultural fantasy not a thing of the past…

1348: Plague invades France -- Most populous of kingdoms

- Bubonic Plague: incubation of 6 days; 60% chance of dying
- Pneumonic Plague: incubation of 2 days; spread by coughing
  - 100% chance of dying in 15th century
- Kills 1/3 of Western Europe
II. From Facts to Effects

on Culture [Ideas + Values]:

Representations / Metaphors /
Mythologies / Meanings / Significances
1. MATERIAL PRE-CONDITIONS [“facts”]: penicillin; transplants; hygiene

2. ORDER: NEWLY THINKABLE [“ideas”]: “I can live to be 100.”

3. ORDER: NEW EXPECTATIONS / ANXIETIES [“values”]:
   “I ought to live to be 100.” “Living to 100 is a good thing.”

From facts to meanings:
From “Hardware” [material conditions] to
“Software” [culture = ideas + values]

“What else does the history of ideas prove, than that
intellectual production [“software”] changes in character
in proportion
as material production [“hardware”] is changed?”

Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto* 241
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A. VISUAL
Representations of shift in cultural mood: disorder moves from margins to center

The end of the confident / optimistic / rationalist “High Middle Ages”

Madonna and Child (1400s)
Mother and Child → Queen of Heaven (cathedral built by French monarchy) supremely confident / optimistic period
cf. Aristotle’s Children: scholasticism = optimism
Representations of shift in cultural mood: disorder moves from margins to center

The end of the confident / optimistic / rationalist “High Middle Ages”
SPECIFICALLY post-1348:

A Crisis of **Mediation**:

The **Remoteness** of God and the **arbitrariness** of his will

(and of the world)
Crisis in mediation
Priest / Holy water = “mediation”

Priest (first estate) mediates between laity and God in the Great Chain of Being

..... but it doesn’t seem to be working!!!
DISORDER / CHAOS ---

has moved from the margins into the center
A crisis in mediation

You preserve the old “forms” … but they seem to have lost their meaning.

→→→ an effect of trauma

Fundamental crisis in TRUST

Anxious questions for post-1348:

Does mediation work? [Especially since our whole societal order --- i.e., THE THREE ORDERS --- depends on it!] Or is it smoke and mirrors?

Can we trust what we perceive? [Aristotle! Aquinas! Essentialists!]

Or are appearances deceptive? [Plato! Nominalists!]
Indeed, this urge is so irresistible, Lilla argues, that only highly unusual circumstances can compel us to give it up. Those unusual circumstances were provided by Christian theology — but not, as some recent religious apologists have argued, because the Judeo-Christian framework itself promotes rationality and tolerance. Rather, it is Christianity’s own fundamental ambiguities — torn between a picture of God as both present and absent from the temporal realm, an ambivalence powerfully represented by the paradoxes of the Trinity — that made it “uniquely unstable,” subject to a plurality of interpretations that became institutionalized in sectarianism, and hence to several centuries’ worth of devastating upheaval.
You preserve the old “forms” [ideas] … but they seem to have lost their meaning.

→→→ an effect of trauma

B. Philosophical Nominalism
The “essence” of a thing is *what it is* or its “what-ness.”

For medievals, “essence” [ *what* a thing is] precedes its “existence” [ *the fact that* it is]

i.e., your identity / meaning is fixed and unchangeable, even before you are born
Unchanging: BLOOD / GENEALOGY
Changing: meritocracy; individual effort

(St.) Thomas Aquinas (Thomism)
[ca. 1225-1274]

14th century: New popularity of William of Occam

Essentialism v. “NOMINALISM”
L. *nomen* = “name”

There is no essential connection between a thing and the name (representation / meaning) we give it

IN OTHER WORDS: names --- and meanings --- are ARBITRARY and CONTINGENT agreements
For a **nominalist**, we never know what things are
“in themselves” / “as they are” / “in their essence.”
We only know the **names** we arbitrarily assign to them ---
on a temporary / contingent / pragmatic consensual basis.

Negatively, this begins an age of **skepticism**.

Oxford Franciscans  [Nominalists]  VS.  Paris Dominicans  [Essentialists]

Positively, this begins the long-range basis for modern science ---
**MODELS** [names]
--- for which all knowledge is
hypothetical, subject to falsification,
not “things-in-themselves”
but rather things as they are-for-us [observed by us].

How to imagine the wave-particle duality.
“wave”
“particle”
\[= \text{names: models}\]

Not knowing “light in itself / light in its essence …”

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*The Name of the Rose* --- a murder-mystery set in a medieval monastery.
The hero is a Sherlock Holmes-type Franciscan investigator who is a nominalist scientist --- a thinly-veiled allusion to William of Occam. He is in continual arguments with the more old-fashioned “essentialist” monks.
Gertrude Stein

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

(“Sacred Emily,” 1913)

• Nominalism = end of rational religion
  – Duns Scotus: “God could have willed the inverse of the 10 commandments”: “Thou shalt steal!”
  – William of Occam: “If God had willed the absolute opposite of the 10 commandments [“Thou shalt commit adultery”] they would have been binding absolutely
  – God’s will is not reasonable --- it is arbitrary … and yet absolutely binding!!!

  – NB: for Aquinas this is absurd. God cannot be ir-rational.
12th-13th centuries: an “Age of Reason” [geometry]

and an “Age of Faith”

Or perhaps: age of “reasonable faith”

C. Musical Example
The end of a predictable cosmic meaningful order; the beginning of a sense of arbitrariness at hands of Fortune.

Juno as the goddess *Fortuna* [ancient Roman]

Ask yourself: why must you go all the way back to the ancient Romans to dig up a goddess for the Middle Ages???

Temple of Fortuna Virilis, late 2nd c. B.C.
Mother and Child \rightarrow Queen of Heaven (cathedral built by French monarchy)
supremely confident / optimistic period
cf. Aristotle’s *Children*: scholasticism = optimism
Representations of shift in cultural mood: disorder moves from margins to center

The end of the confident / optimistic / rationalist “High Middle Ages”

Juno as the goddess *Fortuna* [ancient Roman]

Ask yourself: why must you go all the way back to the ancient Romans to dig up a goddess for the Middle Ages???

Temple of Fortuna Virilis, late 2nd c. B.C.
Wheel of Fortune: in the Duomo (cathedral) in Siena (Italy):
first of marble floor inlays: **1372** !!!!

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**Title I: “O Fortuna”**

- *O Fortuna* / velut *Luna* / statu variabilis
- *O Fortune, like the moon*  
  *you are changeable.*
- *semper crescis / aut descrescis; / vita detestabilis*  
  *ever waxing / and waning; hateful life!*
- *nunc obdurat / et tunc curat*  
  *now oppresses / and then soothes*
- *ludo mentis aciem,*  
  *as playful whim has it,*
- *egestatem, / potestatem / dissolvit ut glaciam.*  
  *poverty / power / it melts them both like ice.*
Sors immanis / et inanis,/ rota tu volubilis,
• Fate --- monstrous / and empty, / you whirling wheel,
• status malus,/ vana salus/ semper dissolubilis,
  you are malevolent / well-being is in vain / and always dissolves into nothing,
• obumbrata / et velata / michi quoque niteris;
  shadowed / and veiled / you plague me too;
• nunc per ludum / dorsum nudum / fero tui sceleris
  I bare my back to your villainy.

Sors salutis / et virtutis / michi nunc contraria
• In health / and in virtue / now [Fortuna] is against me
• est affectus / et defectus / semper in angaria.
  I am driven on / and weighted down always enslaved.
• Hac in hora / sine mora / cordum pulsum tangite;
  So at this hour / without delay pluck the vibrating strings;
• quod per sortem / sternit fortem / mecum omnes plangite!
• since Fate / strikes down the strong man everyone weep with me!
Title II: " Fortune plango vulnera"

- *Fortune plango vulnera / stillantibus ocellis,*
- I bemoan the wounds of Fortune with weeping eyes,
- *quod sua michi munera / subtrahit rebellis.*
  for the gifts she made me she now perversely takes away.

- *Verum est, quod legitur, / fronte capillata,*
  It is truly written that she has a fine head of hair,
- *sed plerumque sequitur / occasio calvata.*
  but when she seizes opportunity she is bald.*** {Repeat loudly}

- {***NB: anthropological boundaries being bent: HAIR! Is she female or male? Only males are bald! Trans-gender}
In Fortune solio / sederam elatus,
On Fortune's throne
I used to sit raised up,

prosperitatis vario / flore coronatus;
crowned with flowers of prosperity;

quicquid enim florui / felix et beatus,
though I may have flourished
happy and blessed,

nunc a summo corrui / gloria privatus.
now I fall from the peak
deprived of glory. {Repeat loudly}
• *Fortune rota volvitur;*  
  *descendo minoratus;*  
  The wheel of Fortune turns;  
  down I go, demeaned;  
• *alter in altum tollitur; nimis exaltatus*  
• another is raised up; / far too high up

*rex sedet in vertice - caveat ruinam!*  
The kind who now sits at the summit ---  
let him fear ruin!  
• *nam sub axe legitimus: Hecubam reginam.*  
  for under the axis [of the wheel] is written:  
  "Queen Hecuba."**  
  {Repeat loudly}

• **In Greek mythology: Hecuba, once daughter of a king, was turned into a dog! NB: anthropological boundaries! [trans-species]