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## ARISTOTLE'S CHILDREN

"The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."

—Whitehead

A profile of Richard E. Rubenstein, *Aristotle's Children: How Christians, Muslims, and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated the Dark Ages*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2003. 268pp. \$27 (cloth). ISBN 0-15-100720-9.

**T**O CHIME THAT ARISTOTLE WROTE THE FOOTNOTES is indeed a clever retort, though it does not break the mold of tradition. The rediscovery of Aristotle by the West does. Aristotle did not write the footnotes, he blurred the margins; he threatened the institution of thought and did this even before his work was ever lost, or burned, or encountered by monotheism. Aristotle criticized Plato, but he did so as a Platonist, from within his teacher's Academy, as "a loyal Academician with ideas of his own...whose attempt to bring his teacher's thinking down to earth was true to the best elements of the master's thought" (30). Still, Aristotle would never become Plato's successor at the Academy; many Academicians saw "in his ideas the potential overthrow of Platonism by a belligerently earthbound naturalism"(30). Rubenstein's book surveys the influence of Aristotle on the intellectual development of the Dark Ages so as to emphasize, not the preeminence of Aristotle, but the parasitical virtue of his philosophy. As Rubenstein writes, "Time and again, [Aristotle's works] fade from sight in one civilization only to reappear centuries later in another, often with the most extraordinary impact. 'Lost' in Greece, they are later 'found' in Rome. Neglected by Byzantine Christians, they inspire a great burst of philosophical creativity in the Islamic world, Unread for centuries in the Latin

West, their rediscovery in medieval Spain triggers an intellectual revolution in Europe" (39-40).

While it is customary in the history of Western thought to understand the intellectual concerns and scholastic pursuits of the medieval period as characteristic of a debate between faith and reason, Rubenstein emphasizes and underscores the creative tension afforded by the desire or the imperative to reconcile the religious paradigm for human striving with this striving's humanness, entailing intellectual curiosity, thirst for knowledge, and ratiocination.

Thus, Aristotle's Children are neither philosophers, nor theologians, they are neither the university's secular academicians, nor its clergymen, and they are neither Greek nor Jew insofar as they are all who are entwined in a debate from which there is no way out, save by forsaking dialogue through the separation and alienation of faith from reason. Stated this way, as a generality, this separation is synonymous with the division of powers between Church and State. Rubenstein, however, reminds us that along with this division, with the scientific, technological, and economic developments that are to the credit of the vindication and enfranchisement of reason, there is also a marginalization of faith from the public sphere. Faith is private, this is why matters of faith are not debated in the public, political sphere; this is also why President Bush can declare war with Iraq stating reasons based on supposedly incontrovertible fact and evidence instead of his own religious principles, and thereby censoring these principles from public debate, as his individual right.

More to the point, Rubenstein's clear, accessible, story-telling style captures the dialogical nature of medieval thought. At stake was not only protecting faith from reason or freeing reason from superstition. At stake was the cultivation of dialogue, conversation, or introspection. At stake was the cultivation of interiority beyond feeling and intimation, and of a world beyond nations and wars.

*Aristotle's Children* recounts the excitement aroused in the Muslims, the Jews, and the Christians who rediscovered the works of Aristotle; it traces the intellectual growth that ensues, the invariable setbacks on academic freedom that follow, and finds that there is no middle ground in resolution.

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