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(Review) Ladder of Shadows: Reflecting on Medieval Vestige in Provence and Languedoc

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Comments

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GUSTAF SOBIN, *Ladder of Shadows: Reflecting on Medieval Vestige in Provence and Languedoc*. Foreword by Michael Ignatieff. (An Ahmanson Foundation Book in the Humanities.) Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2009. Pp. xxii, 236; 24 black-and-white figures. \$50 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).
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Poets do not often write history, but the twenty-five short essays in this volume, and the twenty-six in its predecessor, *Luminous Debris* (1999), reveal what can happen when a poet sets his sensibility and skills to evoking the past. The result is, at times, a heady mix (one of the author's favorite adjectives is "hallucinatory"), but well worth reading. A Boston native, Gustaf Sobin spent the last forty years of his life in Provence (he died in 2005). Drawn there by the presence of the lyric poet René Char, Sobin became increasingly engaged by the traces of the region's past that lie scattered about its varied landscapes. His essays generally focus on a fragmentary object or an all-but-vanished site of some peculiar human endeavor. They are meditations on change, loss, and recovery but also fine micro-historical studies, illuminated by his intimate knowledge of place, facility with language, and judicious reading in recent archaeological and historical scholarship. *Luminous Debris* began with the first evidence of human occupation in southeastern France and ended with the Roman aqueduct of Nîmes, which Sobin characteristically considered not at the so-called Pont du Gard but along its mostly effaced stretches and within its underground passages. *Ladder of Shadows* picks up the chronological thread with the decline of Apt in the late empire, visible in the marks left by floodwaters, soil deposits, and fire below the modern city. It ends with the author witnessing a contemporary restoration, and revelation, of the "charged mysticism" of Romanesque frescoes.

The essays in *Ladder of Shadows* fall into three groups. The first ten invoke the late-antique transformation of the Roman world through such things as a third-century hoard of debased coinage; signs of Christianization in fourth- and fifth-century pottery, sarcophagi, and architecture; the deliberate mutilation and destruction of pagan statuary; and an inscription in the Alpine foothills announcing the foundation, by a Gallo-Roman official and correspondent of St. Augustine, of Theopolis, an actual City of God, of which no other trace remains. The next four essays cover the seventh through the tenth centuries, which Sobin presents as "four hundred years of omissions," among whose rare vestiges are the "blue tears" left by itinerant glassworkers around 700, a scrap of a stone chancel screen, and a crudely carved sarcophagus that could be either Merovingian or Carolingian. The final eleven essays celebrate the return to Provence of stone buildings, figural art, and organized communal life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The first three look at Romanesque architectural innovations: vaulting the nave; constructing domes; and reclaiming ancient sites, materials, and themes. The fourth reconstructs the building of a Romanesque church from the holes left in its facade from scaffolding. The next three expand the chronological scope to take in the whole sweep of human history covered in both volumes of essays. It is here, too, that the ladder metaphor appears most overtly, for Sobin's subject, the process of *incastellamento*, leads him to consider the dialectic between altitude and civilization over the *longue durée*. The first humans in Provence lived in upland caves. As the ice slowly melted, they moved down to river bottoms and began to farm. Subsequent rises in populations and advances in metallurgy brought conflict and war, so people headed up again to create the Iron Age hilltop fortresses (*oppida*) that the Romans found when they entered Gaul. A "lowland civilization," Rome resettled the plains. With the passing of Roman power, many left again for the hills, where the feudalization of the region in the central Middle Ages kept them there to build the round hill-towns (*circulades*) that grew up around the castles of the feudal aristocracy. The next three chapters take up related themes: deforestation, which reached a fundamental turning point around the year 1000, when human incursions began to change the "biological nature of the forest itself";

and the salt trade (treated in two chapters), whose history Sobin evokes most vividly through the rise and fall of the Benedictine abbey of Psalmodi, which lived from it. Before the final essay on Romanesque frescoes, in which the almost microscopic process of restoration mirrors both the microbial decay that has always threatened them and the inherent fragility of their eggshell-thin layers of color, Sobin turns once again to religion, to the discovery of St. Mary Magdalen's relics at Saint-Maximin in 1279 and the rapid rise of her cult, in effect linking the end of the period (and his book) to its beginnings in late antiquity.

Sobin repeatedly mourns the passing of the Roman Empire and writes as if the admittedly benighted condition of the region between the sixth and the eleventh centuries applied to the whole of Europe. He also worries about the possibility of a new dark age when humanity will lose touch with the past, and the natural world, and exist in a world of signs signifying nothing. These elegiac strains can feel overwrought at times, and the book is not without its flaws, but they are outweighed by the author's remarkable ability to communicate the joy of discovery and the myriad possibilities of reading the past from its traces in the present, no matter how small. Simultaneously evocative, idiosyncratic, and scholarly, Sobin's essays offer a history of his adopted homeland in miniatures, each one as "highly charged" by language and personality as the "vestiges" that drew his penetrating gaze.

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JENNIFER SUMMIT, *Memory's Library: Medieval Books in Early Modern England*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. x, 343; 8 black-and-white figures. \$35.

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Albrecht Dürer's *St. Jerome in His Study*, one of eight illustrations in this stimulating book, presents a familiar image of the scholar in peaceful, monastic seclusion. The idea of the scholar-saint offered a powerful cultural antecedent for Renaissance humanists, but, as Summit shows, their libraries were not always the places of retreat and contemplation suggested by humanist study-portraiture. Instead the library—particularly the English post-Reformation library—is in Summit's treatment a place of action, a place where competing literacies clash along the way to knowledge- and nation-building. This is an exhilarating revisiting of books and their places, both cultural and literal, in the early-modern world. It offers close readings of texts, objects, and buildings as it demonstrates the degree to which libraries were, and are, engines of knowledge.

Summit begins by pointing out that the English Middle Ages are the product of Renaissance libraries. While scholars have long followed medieval textual artifacts through the cataclysm of the Reformation and into their new homes in antiquarian and national collections, the focus on how these collections work is Summit's particular contribution. By placing the "transactions of influence and denial" (p. 4) between medieval texts and early-modern readers in the libraries where these encounters occurred, she sets out to show not only how library makers remade the past but also how libraries both formed and reflected past *and* present and the attitudes toward them. Summit reminds us that to know an early-modern library possessed a particular medieval text is only partial knowledge. What we need to know is why the library might have possessed that text, as well as how a reader might have read it. She moves deftly between literary-critical and materialist readings to suggest some answers to these crucial questions.

The five chapters of *Memory's Library* take us from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. The first chapter deals with the relationship between John Lydgate, his patron, Duke Humfrey of Gloucester, and their books. In this chapter we see Lydgate deploying his pen in the service of his abbey by translating and versifying its charters. Bury's attempts to bolster an elite, monastic literacy rooted in its library provide the context for Duke Humfrey's collection. Summit