Folly and the Holy Face: The Medievalism of Ignazio Silone

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Abstract Silone’s strong and highly public commitment to social justice and personal freedom, his direct criticism of the Catholic Church’s politics, and his belief that human energy and action could bring about social change more readily than a passive reliance on Divine Providence alone, make him an unlikely exponent of medieval thought. His writings show otherwise: Silone maintained a consistent, though complex, attachment to the medieval world and found in it powerful political analogues for his own day. In Silone’s works, references to the Middle Ages abound; he describes his native Abruzzo in medieval terms and features radical reformers like Saints Bernard and Francis of Assisi and Joachim of Fiore, men often thought mad or foolish by their contemporaries. His comments on their integral place in his background and thought, and the consistency with which they appear over a lifetime’s work call for a closer look; so too does his mention of his own literary career in terms of medieval monks who spent their lives repainting the Holy Face of Jesus, the literal imago Dei for believers. Silone’s medievalism is not the ornament of nostalgia, nor the vehicle for cynicism or escapism; it is essential to his political orientation, and to seeing in his fictive works that proximate defeat does not mean ultimate despair.

Keywords Silone · Medievalism · Folly · Holy Face · Imago Dei

“So even you have these strange medieval ideas?”
–Ignazio Silone, Bread and Wine

From the 1930s until his death in 1978, Ignazio Silone produced several important novels, a couple of plays, dozens of newspaper articles and political essays. Imprisoned, exiled for many years from his native Italy, and marked as a threat by
both communists and socialists, Silone even collaborated with an American
government agency (the OSS, later the CIA) in anti-fascist resistance. His strong
and highly public commitment to social justice and personal freedom, his direct
criticism of the Catholic Church’s politics, and his belief that human energy and
action could bring about social change more readily than a passive reliance on
Divine Providence alone, make him an unlikely exponent of medieval thought. His
writings, early and late, however, show otherwise: throughout his life, Silone
maintained a consistent, though complex, attachment to the medieval world and
found in it powerful political analogues for his own day. Textual references alone,
of course, are no guarantee of a writer’s approbation, but in Silone, their specifically
medieval nature, his own comments on their integral place in his background and
thought, and the consistency with which they appear over a lifetime’s work, invite a
closer look.

Silone’s writings are replete with religious language and imagery that could stand
in witness to any Christian era, but readers who find in them only a secular gospel,
or even what has been seen as an impulse to restoring primitive Christianity, can do
so only to the degree to which they can dismiss the carefully delineated medieval
signposts throughout. They are not the ornaments of nostalgia, nor the vehicles for
cynicism or escapism; neither are they oddities. In his study of medievalism in
England, Michael Alexander (2007) highlights the popularity of medieval images
and concepts in the modernists and their successors, and emphasizes that “even early
Victorian medievalism was not escapist, but radical” (p. 223). Further, he
notes, Europe in the 1920s and 1930s saw a revival of interest in medieval
philosophy, notably in the work of Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson (p. 245). In
the later war years, as Roy Rosenstein (1997) has shown, medieval literature was
often air-dropped into occupied France as political inspiration and a call to heroic
action. Silone’s attraction is not as pointedly intellectual or propagandist, but so
important is the medieval orientation of his background—he described his own
education as “entirely Scholastic”—that he specifies it even in his candid
recollement of his dangerous shift in political party affiliation: “The private little
world within, the ‘Middle Ages’ which I had inherited and which were rooted in my
soul and from which in the last analysis I had derived the initial impulse toward
revolt, was shaken to its foundation as if by an earthquake” (Silone 1968a, p. 65).

In a prefatory note to the revised edition of his first successful novel, Fontamara,
Silone wrote,

If it were in my power to change the mercantile laws of literary society, I
might well spend my life perpetually rewriting the same story in the hope of at
last understanding it and making it understood, just as in the Middle Ages,
there were monks who spent their whole lives painting and repainting the Holy
Face, always the same face, yet always different. (Silone 2000a, p. 4)

Years later, he would reinforce the notion’s importance to him by writing again
virtually the same sentence in an essay.1 Readers can easily see Silone’s regular

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1 See Silone (1970b): “In the Middle Ages there were monks who spent their lives painting the Holy
Face, always the same face, though in reality the paintings were never quite identical” (p. 12).