

# Immemorial Silence

by Karmen MacKendrick

Karmen MacKendrick, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Le Moyne College, returns to form. With her latest text, *Immemorial Silence*, she continues her project exploring the post-modern notion of transgression, also the central theme of her previous book, *Counterpleasures*. In *Counterpleasures*, MacKendrick explored the paradoxes of transgression as pleasure arising from apparently painful or religious experiences, from asceticism to sado-masochism. In the vein of Bataille's work, her text located historical moments of paradoxical pleasures which by their intensity break open totalizing forms of power. With *Immemorial Silence*, MacKendrick again explores transgression, but this time within the context a different set of themes: language and silence, time and eternity.

MacKendrick's text performatively invites the reader to engage with her in the complexity of language and the paradoxes of time and memory--to, transgressively, seek ruptures that open onto the unspeakable simplicity of silence and eternity. Along the way, she generates insights from a wide array of thinkers in philosophy, theology and literature, from the Middle Ages to the post-modern, weaving a thread of connections from authors as diverse as Blanchot, Bataille, Levinas, Heidegger, Augustine, and Eckart, as well as poets Celan, Rilke, and Hölderlin. For those without a basic familiarity with such thinkers, MacKendrick's work is likely to be quite mystifying; however, for those with a basic understanding of postmodern thought, post-structuralism, post-modern transgression and negative theology, MacKendrick's text is a delight. Her poetic style is both subtle and profound, and though she draws from orthodox thinkers such as Augustine, the spiritual core of her work is daring, insightful and unconventional, even as the themes are timeless.

While sexuality is most thematic in *Counterpleasures*, *Immemorial Silence* is profoundly theological in its focus. In choosing to interpretively encircle the themes of silence and eternity, she finds historical antecedents in the work of ancient mysticism and negative theology. Before Blanchot and Bataille, there was Augustine and Eckhart. Citing Augustine's *Confessions*, "Language can redeem as well as destroy; it redeems when the Word itself speaks in the silence of our words." If post-modernity is centrally concerned with limits--the limits of time and language--it is theology, Mackendrick asserts, that proffers a beginning of sorts, even if such a beginning can only be reflection upon the irretrievable remembrance of the Word. It is this very conundrum that sets Mackendrick on her way.

Yet what is at stake in silence and eternity, in the rupture of language and time? For Mackendrick, grace is at stake, and it is grace that withholds itself in the silence of eternity, concealed within sociality and law. It is in the transgression of sociality and law that one finds grace, and where one finds grace, there is the sacred. There is redemption. As Mackendrick writes: "our sense of redemption in post-Nietzschean theory (that is, after philosophies face the proposition that God is dead) is as much erotic as sacred, and as much disastrous as quiet. In the atemporality of silence within language, we find redemption not in an eternal presence, but in the

complications of silence and absence.” Or, as T. S. Eliot conveyed so well, “If time is eternally present,/All time is unredeemable.”

**BOOK REVIEW** by Brent Dean Robbins