

Passage through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds

David L. Pike

Taking the culturally resonant motif of the descent to the underworld as his guiding thread, David L. Pike traces the interplay between myth and history in medieval and modernist literature. *Passage through Hell* suggests new approaches to the practice of comparative literature, and a possible escape from the current morass of competing critical schools and ideologies. Pike's readings of Louis Ferdinand Céline and Walter Benjamin reveal the tensions at work in the modern appropriation of structures derived from ancient and medieval descents. His book shows how these structures were redefined in modernism and persist in contemporary critical practice. In order to recover the historical corpus of modernism, he asserts, it is necessary to acknowledge the attraction that medieval forms and motifs held for modernist literature and theory. By pairing the writings of the postwar German dramatist and novelist Peter Weiss with Dante's *Commedia*, and Christine de Pizan with Virginia Woolf, Pike argues for a new level of complexity in the relation between medieval and modern poetics. Pike's supple and persuasive reading of the *Commedia* resituates that text within the contradictions of medieval tradition. He contends that the Dantean allegory of conversion, altered to suit the exigencies of modernism, maintains its hold over current literature and theory. The postwar writers Pike treats—Weiss, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott—exemplify alternate strategies for negotiating the legacy of modernism. The passage through hell emerges as a way of disentangling images of the past from their interpretation in the present.

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