

H-France Forum

Volume 7, Issue 2 (Spring 2012), No. 1

Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature & History in Early Modern France*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. viii + 288 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-59148-3.

Review Essay by Dan Edelstein, Stanford University

Literary criticism over the last sixty years has been largely defined by the same avant-garde impulse that characterized literature and the arts during this period, an impulse most famously captured by Arthur Rimbaud's injunction, "Il faut être absolument moderne." Through this process of constantly casting off past paradigms, the past itself emerged as a series of struggles between old and new, conservative and progressive, *ancien* and *moderne*. So it comes as little surprise that the eponymous quarrel between this latter pair of opposites has predominantly been viewed through this Rimbaldian prism. Only "conservative" scholars who are critical of modernity (notably Marc Fumaroli) have dared to uphold the values of the Ancients, while most critics have sided with the Moderns. Some, such as Joan DeJean, have even drawn explicit parallels between the "culture wars" of the twentieth century and the seventeenth-century quarrel.[1]

Larry Norman's delightful and rewarding book does not entirely break with this avant-garde mentality, but he categorically dismisses any identification between the party of the Moderns and the politically progressive "moderns" of today. Rather, it is the party of the Ancients that is redeemed in this study for having "transform[ed] the defense of remote antiquity into something of an avant-garde" (p. 6). Where the Moderns never quite got over their "shock" (real or staged) at ancient customs—licentious gods, ungallant shepherds, uppity heroes—the Ancients reveled, precisely, in the foreignness of these distant worlds. Their appreciation of the past, Norman argues, was not principally cultural or political, but rather aesthetic (p. 6).

Much of Norman's argument hinges on the fact that the Ancients were not crusty old defenders of a crumbling patriarchal order, but rather worldly and broad-minded writers who appreciated the achievements of the "new philosophy" as much as their Modern challengers. Nicolas Boileau, the leader of the Ancient party, poked fun at the Sorbonne for rejecting William Harvey's theory of the circulation of blood in favor of old Aristotelian principles (p. 26); and Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre, another defender of the Ancients, celebrated the recent discoveries in physics and astronomy (p. 40). As Levent Yilmaz suggested in a work that prefigures some of Norman's arguments, the quarrel was not "a debate or conflict between Ancients and Moderns, but a public spat between two Modern factions." [2]

Norman's most damning blow to those who identified the Moderns with the "progressive" party comes in his chapter dealing with that group. Here we are reminded that the Moderns were all in favor of absolutist monarchy; that they supported the censorship of ancient texts; and that they even celebrated the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in the name of religious uniformity (pp. 86-7, 89-90). Indeed, Charles Perrault's forerunner as the Modern champion, Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, was viewed at the time and after as a fundamentalist "zealot," prepared to use violence, if necessary, to ensure the triumph of the Catholic faith (pp. 102-3). It is hard to square these views with any progressive conceptions of modernity.

Throughout the rest of his analysis, Norman displays an even-handed and perspicacious attitude toward his subject, making *The Shock of the Ancient* by far the best book on the real stakes of the quarrel.

Norman clearly demonstrates, for instance, that antiquity was not a monolithic block. Even the Modern partisans recognized “good” ancients, primarily among the Roman (and more specifically Augustan) authors: Perrault used Virgil to criticize Homer (p. 22). And of course they exploited the parallel between Augustus and Louis XIV. In the end (neatly reversing Yilmaz’s claim), Norman argues, “Ancients and Moderns appear simply to be two contending sects within an all-encompassing Ancient party: the Modern party was, in many ways, the Augustan party; the Ancient party, the Homeric one” (p. 23).

One of the great virtues of Norman’s work is that it recasts the quarrel as an “internal conflict” (p. 15) rather than an out-and-out culture war. It was not only that defenders of the ancients sang the praises of the Moderns and that defenders of the Moderns celebrated certain ancients; it was also that many participants were genuinely torn, unsure about which “side” they fell on. François Fénelon offers perhaps the best example of such indecision: in his *Lettre à l’Académie*, he sought a *via media* between the two camps, suggesting that “if you [the Moderns] are ever able to defeat the Ancients, you will owe the glory of your victory to them.”[3] This was the attitude that would largely prevail during the Enlightenment. In the *Encyclopédie* article on “Erudition,” for instance, Jean d’Alembert proposed that “reading the Ancients can shed much light on the study of science.”[4] The road to modern achievement went through Athens and Rome.

There is much else to praise in this highly readable book, which gleams with wit and intelligence on every page. Given the dialogical nature of *H-France Forum*, however, I will close with two claims that left me somewhat less convinced and curious to hear more.

The first point has to do with authority. As Norman notes in chapter four, the question of ancient authority—as in “it must be true if Aristotle said it”—was largely a non-issue during the quarrel. When it featured at all, it was in the form of polemical statements made by Modern sympathizers (“they want me to trust Aristotle!”), whereas the Ancients never played this card. Given the authoritative role that ancient authors had occupied until very recently in humanist culture, this absence might seem surprising. Norman ascribes it to “the radical reversal of the traditional analogy between the lifespan of collective humanity and the lifespan of the individual” (p. 64). Where the ancients used to be associated with, well, “ancientness,” they came to be regarded instead as “infantile.” In their place, the Moderns now stood as the truly venerable and mature generation.

This is a very insightful observation. But one may ask whether it captures the whole picture. In particular, Norman does not add address the phenomenon that Blandine Barret-Kriegel aptly termed (in a book by that name) *La défaite de l’érudition*. [5] At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a Justus Lipsius could still rely on Tacitus as the supreme authority for political knowledge, yet by the end of the century, even erudite scholars were cautious to avoid the appearance of pedantry. [6] Jean de La Bruyère (an Ancient) himself criticized those authors who cared only about “enlarging rather than enriching libraries, by burying the text under the weight of commentaries.” [7] Leading scholars at the end of the seventeenth century, such as Pierre-Daniel Huet, also participated in salon culture, an activity that made itself felt in their more learned works as well. [8]

The loss of authority by ancient authors was therefore the result not only of an intellectual reversal (the ancients switching from “seniors” to “children”), but also of a broader cultural process through which the world of learning became increasingly enmeshed with *le monde* itself. What this transformation highlights is arguably a hidden and largely non-polemical dimension of the quarrel. After all, the driving force behind this shift was none other than the quintessentially “modern” quality of politeness or *galanterie*. In a sense, then, it might be said that by 1687 (when Perrault’s poem was read at the Académie française) the critical battle between Ancients and Moderns had already taken place, and what’s more, offstage. Worldly *mœurs* had banned displays of erudition and appeals to ancient authors

from polite society. This interpretation ultimately rejoins one of Norman's own key points, which is that the Ancients were really just Moderns of a different ilk.

The second point concerns the aftermath of the quarrel. In Norman's telling, the authors who rose to the defense of the ancients were somewhat unique in the history of classical reception. Unlike their Renaissance predecessors, they did not seek to bridge the temporal chasm separating them from antiquity, even if, as Norman deftly notes, in the process of doing so, erudite humanists often deepened this divide (p. 36). And unlike their neoclassical successors, they did not pursue "an identification with ancient models" (p. 89), an identification epitomized for Norman by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's fantasies of becoming a Roman citizen or the revolutionary habit of (in Karl Marx's famous words) "perform[ing] the tasks of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases."^[9] The primary claim that Norman wishes to make thanks to this comparison is very sound, namely that "the power of the ancient countermodel to modern monarchy was certainly a hallmark of the generations that succeeded the quarrel" (p. 89). But did this power exert itself through a process of identification?

In Norman's defense, there is certainly plenty of evidence pointing in the direction of a quasi blind identification with the ancient (particularly Roman) past in late-eighteenth-century France. In an amusing passage of his *Tableau de Paris*, Louis-Sébastien Mercier describes his surprise, as a schoolboy, at discovering that he did not live in republican Rome but in absolutist France.^[10] And the French revolutionaries were indeed fond of evoking Roman precedents, and even of adopting Roman names (e.g., "Gracchus" Babeuf). But again, is identification the best way to describe their relation to antiquity? Despite their predilection for all things Roman, the revolutionaries ended up creating modern institutions. They rejected the institution of the Senate, shied away from consular power, and did not grant official recognition to any of the self-appointed "tribunes of the people." Even in their emergency measures, the revolutionaries rejected ancient ways: instead of proscription lists that granted anyone the right to kill the proscribed victim, they maintained a state monopoly on repression through military committees and revolutionary tribunals. Despite the Roman phrases, their politics was very eighteenth-century French.

What, then, was their relation to antiquity? As Elena Russo has argued in a recent book, for eighteenth-century Ancients, the distant past was first and foremost a "style," a certain attitude toward rhetoric and language that privileged eloquence and the sublime.^[11] In this regard, Enlightenment Ancients were not that different from those studied by Norman, for whom antiquity, in his telling, also represented an "aesthetic" (p. 6). But differences can also be found. For instance, a series of books has recently explored how Enlightenment authors revived ancient philosophical doctrines, including Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism.^[12] While traces of this interest in pagan philosophy existed in the late seventeenth century as well (one thinks notably of Gassendi and Fontenelle), most of the authors Norman studies remained firmly in the Christian camp. Even during this "rise of modern paganism" (to borrow Peter Gay's title), however, the *philosophes* retained their intellectual independence, borrowing from ancient doctrines when it suited them but often transforming them as well. More than identification, therefore, the Enlightenment (and revolutionary) attitude toward antiquity might better be viewed as a kind of "appropriation:" the legacy of the ancients was a grab-bag of ideas, models, arguments, and (yes) identities to be tried on, retailored, and disposed of when no longer useful.

These comments largely concern chronological periods that fall beyond the stated purview of Norman's book, so it may be somewhat unfair to quibble with his descriptions of enlightened interest in antiquity. But I offer them less as a criticism of his exemplary work, and more as an indication of how stimulating his arguments are for rethinking the longer intellectual history of classical reception.

NOTES

[1] Marc Fumaroli, “Les abeilles et les araignées,” in Anne-Marie Lecoq ed., *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 8–218; and Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1997). See also, in this latter vein, Siep Stuurman, *François Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[2] Levent Yilmaz, *Le Temps moderne. Variations sur les anciens et les contemporains* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 29.

[3] François Fénelon, *Lettre à l'Académie* (1714; Geneva: Droz, 1970), pp. 125, 122.

[4] “Erudition,” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D'Alembert (Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Spring 2011 edition), Robert Morrissey, ed. <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>. 5:918. I discuss the continuing admiration for the Ancients among the *philosophes* in *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010).

[5] Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *La défaite de l'érudition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

[6] See Jacob Soll, *Publishing ‘The Prince’: History, Reading, and the Birth of Political Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 31–40; and Joscelyn Royé, “La littérature comique et la critique du latin au XVII^e siècle,” in Emmanuel Bury ed., *Tous vos gens à latin. Le latin, langue savante, langue mondaine (XIV^e–XVII^e siècles)* (Geneva: Droz, 2005), pp. 223–36.

[7] Jean de La Bruyère, “Les Caractères ou les mœurs de ce siècle (1688),” in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Julien Benda (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 431.

[8] See April Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life, 1650–1720* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2007), chap. 3.

[9] Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York, N.Y.: Norton, 1978), p. 595.

[10] Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1783), 1:254–55.

[11] Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

[12] See Neven Leddy and Avi S. Lifschitz, eds., *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009); Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightened Pleasures: Eighteenth-Century France and the New Epicureanism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010); and Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment, or Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). I survey a number of these works in a forthcoming review essay, “The Classical Turn in Enlightenment Studies,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 1 (2012): 61–71.

Dan Edelstein
Stanford University
danedels@stanford.edu

Copyright © 2012 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to

the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

ISSN 1557-7058

H-France Forum, Volume 7, Issue 2 (Spring 2012), No. 1