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

Review Essay by Alan Charles Kors, University of Pennsylvania.

In this fractious moment of academic life, whole disciplines in the humanities ask questions that barely touch each other. There was a time, however, when literary scholars and intellectual historians almost all lived in the same conceptual world. Discerning “authorial intent” had not yet been declared a “fallacy;” the so-called “linguistic turn” had not yet moved (morphing in the process) from the Vienna Circle to post-structuralist circles; and the intricacies and jargon of so-called “critical theory” had not yet been placed above the actual record of the human past that it was supposed to illuminate. There was a symbiosis and affinity between the literary and historical disciplines that enriched our common academic life. We both cared profoundly about context and about an empathetic understanding of other minds, other times, other places, other worldviews, and other sensibilities. For historians seeking to make sense of the transformations of early modern European thought, the work of Walter T. Rex, Elisabeth Labrousse, Ira O. Wade, Ruth Whelan, Aram Vartanian, Hans Aarsleff, and Gita May, among countless others—all issued from departments of literature—changed, challenged, and deepened the ways in which historians understood or debated the past.[1] Larry F. Norman’s *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* reminds us of the gift brought to history by the insight of a scholar who, profoundly immersed in a period and its debates, knows how to find with rigor the significant meanings and ramifications of literary, aesthetic, and cultural alterations in the movements of human thought and expression.

Norman has rescued the celebrated “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns” and its subsequent revealing war over the value of Homer’s epic poetry from the diversely tendentious, diversely celebratory, and diversely teleological treatments they generally receive. In the process, he has forced us to reconsider—his goal—the actual terms of these late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century debates, the affinities that often existed between contestants, and the nuanced disagreements that co-existed within seeming camps. Above all, he has disclosed the vital emergence of a sense of the foreignness, the sublimity, the excitement—“the shock” of difference in Greek and Roman literature—from the works of those Ancients who are commonly deemed a seventeenth-century rearguard that still defended the presumptive authority of the past.

Norman’s breadth of erudition and his awareness of political, intellectual, and literary contexts join a rigorously analytic and historically empathetic reading of texts, with a superb eye for the concession, explanation, and phrasing that reveal an author (or group of authors) in ways that make us incapable of simplistic caricature. He jolts our sense that “progress” is embodied in the Moderns. The Ancients fully and without difficulty conceded the advances of natural philosophy that in their eyes, as with the Moderns, rendered the experimental and mathematical achievements of their century far superior to the physics, astronomy, physiology, or method (in these domains) of antiquity. The essential issues were aesthetic, writ in largest form: the thrill of the discovery of difference; the beauty of language unrestrained by “modern” norms; the noetic and emotive power of understanding other peoples in their own alien lives, modes of knowing, and forms of expression. In Norman’s meticulously argued work,

the Ancients of the seventeenth century, far from failing to understand and from rejecting cultural difference—*pace* both Clifford Geertz and Isaiah Berlin on this issue (pp. 29–31), embraced strangeness as the great strength of Homer, pre-Christian mythological writing, Greek tragedy, and ancient poetry, and as its most salient, edifying, and awesome characteristic. [2]

As Norman argues convincingly, innovative thinkers of the eighteenth century did not create by some ideational parthenogenesis a mode of understanding the culturally foreign in terms of the culturally foreign (with all of its dramatic implications for the future of interpretation, sensibility, and judgment). They were the heirs of the Ancients, in many and paradoxical ways, at least as much as they were the heirs of the Moderns. It was the Ancients of the seventeenth century who could separate politics, morals, mores, and, at times, even theology from poetry and cultural expression.

Unlike so many in today's scholarly world, Norman resists the temptation to create a meta-thesis out of this conclusion, qualifying almost all generalizations of significance by reference back to the hesitations, partial expressions, and ambiguities of the texts. Anyone who knows the bodies of literature with which he deals understands how often he rejected the lure of tendentiousness. Indeed, selective citation could have gone much further, yielding "the Norman thesis." Instead, he shows in chapter after chapter an unwavering commitment to textual and contextual fidelity. He is determined that the reader not understand him in any too falsely concrete a manner. Thus, at the end of chapter two, having educed a kind of ideal-type of the Ancient and Modern positions, he reminds us of the nuances already identified, and he notes, "We would best conclude such speculation by affirming that there are Ancient and Modern positions to be found in writings, but no pure and simple Ancients and Moderns among actual writers" (p.49). Further, to his credit, there are moments when he worries that readers will find him *too* original, and he refers us to the work of Borgerhoff, Hepp, Grell, and (with interesting reservations) Gumbrecht, all of whom had offered portraits of the quarrel that recognized the complexity of seeking to distinguish the two camps (pp. 33, 231 n.9). [3] His qualification of his admiration for Gumbrecht, however, namely, Norman's view that the French Enlightenment diversely appropriated perspectives of the Ancients long before a Herder did, is argued convincingly. In his conclusion, he notes Voltaire's observation in the *Lettres philosophiques* that Shakespeare, for all the seeming barbarism of his language, offered us "beautés, d'autant plus singulières que ce sont des éclairs qui ont brillé dans la nuit la plus profonde....Tel est le privilège du génie d'invention:...il court sans guide, sans art, sans règle....Tel à peu près était Homère: Il a créé son art, et l'a laissé imparfait: c'est un chaos encore; mais la lumière y brille déjà de tous côtés" (p. 213). What is the influence of the Ancients upon this most modern of Moderns? That is exactly the question that opens the door to reconsideration of the most fundamental received notions. The *Shock of the Ancients* is an exemplary work of simultaneously subtle, forceful, persuasive, and honest scholarship.

Norman is as historically and rhetorically sensitive to the Moderns as he is to the Ancients. He understands and explicates the political demands created by the pressure to celebrate the reign of Louis XIV and to present Louis's France as the greatest age of human artistic and cultural achievement. He understands and explains that their heartfelt respect of a new, "civilized" literature did not diminish, in most cases, their sense of the genius that had preceded their own, or, indeed, the Christian age. He understands full well the logic of their Christian recoil from the "depraved" portraits of the polytheistic gods of the Greeks and Romans and from the cruelties and frailties of antique heroes. He is unremittingly perceptive about how the rhetoric of early modern "quarrels" led to polemical extremes that created the appearance of greater polarization than the texts, in fact, reveal. Nonetheless, he makes the reader grasp that this was no ordinary or reputation-driven early modern "quarrel," but a debate and rethinking that would reshape the options of Western thought about both literary and, with dramatic consequence, intercultural understanding.

Although the scope of Norman's work is broad in terms of time and geography—he ranges over two generations, and he moves from France to England when relevant to understanding interaction in the Republic of Letters—he does ignore materials that only would have strengthened his reconsideration of the issues involved. Most importantly, he ignores the learned journals, where these debates were a constant presence and where they were explicated in a great variety of ways for the general educated reading public. He does not study the profusion of seventeenth-century Latin (or indeed French) classical scholarship and erudition that laid the groundwork for and informed early modern understanding of Greece and Rome. Indeed, authors who wrote in Latin, despite their omnipresence in the learned world, barely exist for him. He does not explore the phenomenon of the explosion of translation from the Greek and Latin in the seventeenth century, focusing almost exclusively on the authors, from their midst, who featured prominently in the “quarrel.” He misses, thereby, the profusion of critical notes and commentary by which so many early modern readers learned of the Greek and Roman worlds. Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, so widely read, so influential, and devoting so much vital space to Greece and Rome, and, above all, to contemporaneous claims of knowledge of them, receives no attention here (and Bayle himself is mentioned merely three times, all in passing). These are lapses that were all missed opportunities to enrich Norman's very arguments.

By allowing the subsequent debate about Homer to color so very much of his compelling sense of changes in judgment about distant cultures, Norman also avoids the problems raised by varying judgments of classical authors under intense discussion in the period he analyzes. The pre-Socratics, Epictetus, Plutarch's *Moralia*, the Stoics, and, above all, perhaps, the Epicureans and Lucretius are missing here, and study of their reception might well have complicated yet further the complicated portrait he draws. The Jesuits, for example, taught Lucretius's *De rerum natura* in Latin as a model of poetic craftsmanship, without worrying for the longest time about the theology (or anti-theology) it contained. As was true for Norman's Ancients, so it was for the intellectual culture in general: The two domains—poetry and theology—were separable. Lucretius was widely published, translated, annotated, and reviewed in the learned journals both before and during the period Norman addresses, and generally, *De rerum natura* was greeted with great enthusiasm, precisely because of the widespread severability of theology and poetry favored by most of the erudite world. Norman understands the necessity and implications for the Ancients of separating aesthetic from theological issues, but the severability of even pagan anti-providential philosophy from stern Christian judgment suggests a broader openness to the past *qua* past in the early modern erudite world than what emerged from the contest of Ancients and Moderns.

Thus, the widespread interest in Lucretius in early modern orthodox culture reveals that a confident curiosity about scholarly interest in foreign and distant ways of thinking was a vital part of broader French seventeenth-century intellectual life. Sixteenth-century France had produced a variety of Latin editions of Lucretius' work. The seventeenth century published Latin editions of Lucretius in 1620, 1626, 1662, 1680, and 1696. In 1650, the first publication of Lucretius in the vernacular French was offered by Michel de Marolle's Latin edition with French prose translation, *Le Poète Lucrèce, latin et françois*, revised and corrected in a second edition of 1659. Langlois offered a poetic French rendering of de Marolle's prose, an effort that was in a third edition by 1677. The quite foreign pagan Lucretius was, in fact, a familiar and welcome presence in seventeenth-century learned reading.

The abbé Michel de Marolle's role as the first translator of Lucretius into French reflects the respectability of such an undertaking in orthodox learned culture, whatever the “shock.” De Marolles was an esteemed student of the classics, who published critical editions and translations of Tibullus, Catullus, Juvenal, Horace, Martial, and Ovid. Significantly, twelve years after publishing his translation of Lucretius, de Marolles was chosen to translate the breviary for the *office de la Semaine Sainte* from

Latin to French, as part of the pious undertaking by the society of publishers for an accessible *Livre de la Semaine Sainte* (1662). In 1685, Jacques Parrain, baron Des Coutures, released his own critical translation of *De rerum natura, Lucretius. De la nature des choses*, a two-volume Latin-French edition, published in Paris. It was vastly successful, being reprinted in Paris in 1692, 1695, and (twice) in 1708. Reviewing the Des Coutures edition in the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in July, 1685, Bayle expressed the late-seventeenth-century's sense that in Des Coutures's edition it possessed, at last, a vernacular Lucretius that did justice to the original text and that was accompanied by an appropriate scholarly apparatus, since, in Bayle's influential view, "it is necessary to have real mastery of the Latin language and [ancient] physics truly to understand the original [text] of this poet."^[4] We see, in so much of early modern French classical scholarship and re-creation of ancient world-views, a robust recognition of the need to understand the past in terms of the past, and Norman should have addressed the issues arising from that vast endeavor of classical editing, commentary, and analysis. The issue of openness to the strangeness of heterodox ancient thought extends far beyond a literary quarrel in the vernacular.

Norman also ignores the case of Euclid's status as an ancient authority, using geometry as a distinguishing characteristic of the Cartesian Moderns, without coming to terms with the Cartesians' devotion to the ancient geometer himself. Finally, Norman's Cartesians are a bit too uniform. One would not suspect from his account the widespread presence of Cartesian mystics, Cartesian monks, or Cartesian translators of ancient authors. (Of course, this criticism and that of the prior paragraphs constitute the obligatory "If I had written his book" section of any scholarly review. Note well that I could not have written his book.) Further, against such criticisms, Norman has a ready response, which is essential to his perspective and, in the end, essentially compelling. However one might use the contestation of Ancients and Moderns to evince conclusions about natural philosophy, theology, politics, erudition, or gender, he persuades us, we must not lose sight "of the fundamentally literary nature of the quarrel," whatever its later implications (p. 130).

Norman, en route, offers original and astute views of Perrault, Boileau, Longepierre, Fontenelle, and Fénelon, which is not easily done, exploring nuanced sides of them, particularly striking in the case of the last. Norman reveals, with close textual attention, a Fénelon, so central to the theological and political drama of his time, who plays an important role in permitting, indeed urging, Christian readers of pagan literature "to develop," in Norman's words, "a kind of double consciousness: a philosophical and moral one that disapproves, and an aesthetic one that takes delight." As Norman notes, however, such a double consciousness might endure for decades, but it was inherently "fragile," since the "pathos" and the "absurd" in Homer were always interactive for the Christian reader. Nonetheless, he concludes acutely, "That is the great secret of the 'shock' of the ancient: to place moral and philosophical discomfort at the service of the sublime" (p. 212).

The Shock of the Ancient, in addition to these many virtues, is an exquisitely written work, its voice always lucid and enticing. Without affectation, the author draws one into his own intellectual, literary, and historical delight; into the subtle articulation of his rigorous and probing analyses and theses; into his occasional, welcome, and graceful asides to the reader; and, *mirabile dictu*, into his exemplary model of clarity and precision without jargon. It is a study—substantively, stylistically, and in its fierce integrity—to be treasured.

[1] Walter E. Rex, *Essays on Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1965); Rex, *The Attraction of the Contrary: Essays on the Literature of the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Elisabeth Labrousse, *Pierre Bayle*, 2v. (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1963-64); Ira O.

Wade, *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1938 [reprinted, 1967]); Wade, *Voltaire and Madame du Châtelet: An essay on the Intellectual activity at Cirey* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press and London: Oxford University Press, 1941); Wade, *Voltaire and Candide: A Study in the Fusion of History, Art, and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959); Ruth Whelan, *The Anatomy of Superstition: A Study of the Historical Theory and Practice of Pierre Bayle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1989); Aram Vartanian, *Diderot and Descartes: A Study of Scientific Naturalism in the Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953); Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967 [reprinted Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, and London: Athlone Press, 1983]); Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982); and Gita May, *De Jean-Jacques Rousseau à Madame Roland: Essai sur la sensibilité préromantique et révolutionnaire* (Geneva: Droz, 1964).

[2] Norman is referring to Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1973), 30-35; and to Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 59-76.

[3] See E.B.O. Borgerhoff, *The Freedom of French Classicism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950); Noémi Hepp, "La querelle des anciens et des modernes," in J. Mesnard, ed. *Précis de littérature du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); Chantal Grell, "La querelle d'Homère et ses incidences sur la connaissance historique," in R. Duchêne and G. de Donville, eds. *D'un siècle à l'autre: Anciens et modernes* (Marseille: Centre meridional de rencontres sur le XVIIe siècle, 1987); and Hans U. Gumbrecht, *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, trans. G. Burns (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). See also Grell, *Le dix-huitième siècle et l'antiquité en France, 1680-1789*, 2v. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995); Hepp, *Homère en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968); and Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philosophy: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

[4] *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (Juillet 1685), 812-13.

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