

*H-France Forum*

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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 (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-59148-3

Response Essay by Larry F. Norman, University of Chicago

I wrote *The Shock of the Ancient* with the aim of uncovering the fundamental intellectual stakes at play in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns—and also with the hope of reanimating for a contemporary reader the transformative drama of a decades-long debate that reshaped historical awareness and literary sensibilities. It is thus tremendously gratifying not only to read the deeply engaged and insightful readings it has generated from the four distinguished scholars represented here, but also to witness the robust yet nuanced confrontation of ideas created by their own contending reviews. The essays by Dan Edelstein and Alan Charles Kors, while thoughtfully indicating missed opportunities that would have further advanced the argument of the book, largely embrace its essential approach. In contrast, the essays by Dinah Ribard and Nicolas Schapira, while generously saluting the contribution made by the book, take considerable issue with some of the basic methodological choices entailed by this same approach. Reading the reviews side by side thus illuminates some of the conceptual and methodological differences that condition our understanding today of what historical scholarship and literary interpretation are and do. And in the process, as both Ribard and Schapira point out, these differing approaches cannot fail but to continue and to refashion certain elements of the debate conducted over three centuries ago during the Quarrel under examination.

I will respond to Edelstein's and Kors's suggestions concerning the expansion of the corpus and the contextualization of the argument before turning to the broader methodological issues addressed by Ribard and Schapira. But first, I note a certain common ground that I believe to be shared by the four reviewers, despite their diverging positions. Each of the authors provides a thoughtful and generally faithful summary of the principal argument of the book, according to which the period of the Quarrel saw a rise in historical consciousness that defamiliarized Greek and Latin classics and thereby rendered them alternately more shocking and more sublime. In doing so, this sense of distance played a key role in transforming conceptions of aesthetic pleasure and the autonomy of literature. None of the reviewers sets out to contest the basic threads of this literary historical narrative. Some raise questions about the texts chosen, and others, more challengingly, about the methods used to isolate, to organize, and to interpret them, but the principal conclusions do not draw sustained fire. And perhaps most revealingly, unlike so much past scholarly discussion of the Quarrel, none of the reviewers takes one of the traditional "partisan" positions in favor of either the Ancients or Moderns. I take this as salutary evidence that our post-post-modern era has indeed attained the critical distance necessary for a serious re-evaluation of the complexities of a debate so consequential for early modern history and literature.

Turning to the reviews of Edelstein and Kors, I shall consider their suggested emendations under two rubrics, concerning the choice first of the ancient and second of the early modern authors examined in the book. Concerning the first, I am deeply grateful for Kors's pertinent remarks regarding the ancient moral and natural philosophers, historians, and orators who attracted enormous scholarly interest in the seventeenth century, and yet who often receive

only passing attention in *The Shock*. Lucretius is indeed a perfect example, and recent works by Catherine Wilson and Stephen Greenblatt have explored precisely the dynamic by which the recovery of antiquity paradoxically serves, in the latter's words, as a "midwife to modernity." [1] In this regard, it is particularly helpful that Kors draws attention to the too often overlooked "widespread severability of theology and poetry" that allowed Lucretius to flourish in even orthodox circles. I would add that Lucretius is of particular interest due to his crucial influence upon a French brand of empirical thought, from Montaigne and Gassendi onward, which played, as I point out, an important role in the experiential and sensorial approach to literature elaborated by Ancient partisans (pp. 46, 233n23, 198-204). [2]

Moving from ancient authors to the early modern texts that form the central corpus under examination in the *The Shock*, Kors is indeed correct that, by concentrating largely on the literary authors and essayists who drove the debate (Boileau, Perrault, Longepierre, Fontenelle, La Motte, etc.) and on their works of criticism and translation aimed primarily at a broad reading public, I have given much less attention to learned journals and to the "vast endeavor of classical editing, commentary, and analysis" that included an important array of neo-Latin works. Of course, certain of the authors examined in the book wrote precisely at the intersection of learned philology and polite cultivation, Anne Dacier being exemplary of this confluence. Here, Kors joins Edelstein, who argues for more sustained attention to the increasing interplay between the sphere of erudition and that of salon culture and to the increasing hegemony of the latter over the former. I have tried to address these issues to some degree in chapter four ("Ancients Without Authority," particularly pp. 69-73), where I show how Ancient partisans, while informed by contemporary erudition, joined Moderns in mocking pedantry (particularly neo-Latin learning) in their aim to seduce polite society. That chapter is of course anything but the last word on the period's problematic intertwining of scholarship and sociability, and the early modern history of learning is, as Edelstein's and Kors's apt references to contemporary research point out, a bustling field to which the limited space devoted to it in *The Shock* can only add partial additional perspective.

Edelstein also adds some stimulating reflections concerning the aftermath of the Quarrel and the political uses of antiquity in the later Enlightenment, which receive only brief attention in *The Shock*. His own work on this important matter is exemplary. [3] As Edelstein notes, despite their debt to earlier ancient apologists, the *philosophes* hardly engaged in a "blind identification" with Greek and Roman models, but instead adopted an attitude of selective and independent-minded "appropriation." My response is that I agree entirely. I hope that my book would not lead the reader to believe otherwise. It is true that certain brief passages, particularly regarding Rousseau, refer to a passionate identification with ancient republican values (pp. 58, 89). However, one of the principal thrusts of my concluding argument dealing with the later eighteenth-century impact of the Quarrel concerns the paradoxical cohabitation of aesthetic appreciation with political disapproval of ancient poetry, summed up in Diderot's formula from the 1758 *De la poésie dramatique* expressing his conflicted enthusiasm for the barbaric but sublime Greek past: "I do not say such customs are good, only that they are poetic" (p. 221). This is indeed a selective appropriation of the past.

To shift now to the essays by Ribard and Schapira, the authors converge in faulting the lack of weight given in *The Shock* to the precise material, temporal, and social contexts of the works under consideration. Ribard would like the analyses of individual passages to be better grounded in an examination of the writers as "acteurs sociaux" and of the overall engagements of the texts from which they are extracted. In a similar vein, Schapira mentions the "cadre d'énonciation" as being generally ignored and regrets the lack of attention devoted "à l'organisation, aux formes, aux acteurs, aux lieux de la polémique," including to the format, function, and circulation of the printed objects implicated.

These remarks cut to the heart of the methodological choices made in writing *The Shock*. To a large extent, which I will qualify below, I agree that the choices made in exploring and narrating the interplay of ideas did indeed, like all such choices, exclude a good deal of other contextual matter that could shed important light on the debate. As Schapira rightly points out, I chose to hew closely to the “dynamique argumentative” of the debate and furthermore did so hoping to make these ideas fully resonate with each other. Beyond this, I hoped to make them also resonate with a modern reader. I did so not by anachronistically re-costuming the arguments in contemporary terms, but instead by activating the drama of the debate with a relatively spare but accurate historic backdrop and décor designed to enable the conflict of ideas to emerge without blocking their swift movement or obscuring their power to stimulate.

We might agree then that each approach, privileging the concrete social inscription of texts or not, has its particular advantages and disadvantages, and simply call it a day. I am concerned, however, that Ribard has sensed that my approach might suggest some kind of “dédain pour des propositions méthodologiques différentes.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Yet, to be fair to Ribard, I can see where such a perception might arise. It is true that at times, particularly in the beginning of the work, I use the term “polemic” in a dismissive fashion (pp. 12-16). At the heart of the problem are two diverging uses of the term “polemic” (or “polemical”): the first concerns determinations of value, the second methods of analysis. As for the first, space does not allow me to rehearse here all the negative associations it has produced in a long tradition of literary and intellectual history with reductive and tendentious readings, particularly debilitating when used to deny the Quarrel any real significance. As for the second, the term has been employed, particularly in the last decades of literary studies, not only objectively to designate a genre and categorize groupings of texts, but more importantly to develop and refine the methodological tools necessary to examine them in relation to their social situations, rhetorical strategies, print manifestations, and political engagements. Scholarship on the specificities of polemical works and spaces of controversy in early modern France has thus given rise to an array of important works, including, but hardly limited to, those of Christian Jouhaud, Alain Viala, Hélène Merlin-Kajman, Gilles Declerq, Gérard Ferreyrolles, Antoine Lilti, and Mathilde Bombart.<sup>[4]</sup> If *The Shock* often follows a different path, it is in no way due to a lack of tremendous esteem for and debt to them.

While my approach often entails a more spare approach to social, political and even rhetorical contextualization than others, this hardly means that I abandon so situating the texts examined. No doubt motivated by the legitimate interests of drawing the kind of clear contrasts that enliven a forum such as the one proposed by H-France, Schapira employs a thick brushstroke in claiming that the passages from authors cited in the book “ne sont jamais remplacés dans la logique d’ensemble ou la démarche des textes dans lesquels ils se trouvent.” Even if we take “never” as casually figurative hyperbole, it may be difficult for the reader of this forum to reconcile this charge of decontextualization with the praise given by Kors precisely to *The Shock*’s “unwavering commitment to textual and contextual fidelity.” Once again, one scholar’s decontextualization is another’s recontextualization. My own practice of contextualization avowedly tends to privilege the “dynamique argumentative” over the framework of its enunciation; however, to name just two examples, the pages devoted to the literary field and censorship (pp. 67-74) and to the political and academic positioning of the authors (pp. 89-98, 122-23) are designed, as Kors indicates, to “explicate the political demands” under which the writers produced their texts. Perhaps more importantly, Schapira suggests that the analyses are based on “citations courtes” and are not fully alert to their rhetorical tactics and ironies. Again the reader might have trouble reconciling this critique with Kors’s assertion that the book is “as historically and rhetorically sensitive to the Moderns as [...] to the Ancients” or with his appraisal of its “superb eye for the concession, explanation, and phrasing that reveal an

author.” In the interests of brevity, I would propose to the reader who has not yet read the book to scan quickly the layout of its pages, where one will rapidly remark two striking elements: the large number of block quotations that can hardly be qualified as short, and the fact that these are given both in translation and in their native French. The inclusion of the French original for all quotes, which is an increasingly rare practice for American university presses, was very much an intentional decision, supported by my editor and indicative of the desire to attend to the rich nuances of the sources’ vocabulary, rhetorical strategies, and ironies.

Finally, I find interesting that both Ribard and Schapira should choose the term “psychologique” to qualify my approach. Neither this term nor any of its conceptual cousins appear in Kors’s or Edelstein’s essays. It may indeed strike the reader as odd that it is employed at all in regard to a book that all agree devotes very little attention to biographical analyses or personal motivations. The term is thus not to be taken in its generally received sense. Ribard rather seems to suggest that I am putting the seventeenth century as a whole on the couch, so to speak, and seeking in its texts “des signes ou des symptômes” of a hidden movement of ideas. But this argument would seem to relegate all hermeneutic activity to the psychological domain, even forms of explication and interpretation based entirely on the conscious and explicit interplay of conceptual paradigms. I’ll return to that problem in a moment, but first, it must be noted that Ribard and Schapira do rightly highlight here the importance I give to affectivity in the Quarrel. Indeed, one of the principal aims of *The Shock* is to explore how the discourse of detached critical reason intertwines with that of a charged emotional relationship with both history and literature. Although I deem this interplay to be particularly crucial to the evolution of aesthetic paradigms, in doing so I am not somehow penetrating the deep collective unconscious of the Age of Louis XIV, but rather exploring the intellectual presuppositions and goals of a perfectly literal, deliberate, and overt discourse incarnated in such lines as this from Longepierre: “A scene from Sophocles terrifies me or makes me weep. Is it possible to say that this cannot be so when my experience convinces me of the contrary? Is it possible to assert that I do not feel what I feel?” [“Une scène de Sophocle m’épouvante ou m’arrache des larmes; dirai-je que cela ne peut pas être quand mon expérience me convainc du contraire? Soutiendrai-je que je ne sens pas ce que je sens?”] (p. 3).

Aspects of an early modern “psychology” are thus certainly at play in the Quarrel itself. I would argue, however, that psychological interpretation plays very little role in my examination of it. But the term seems to be employed in a very capacious manner by Ribard and Schapira to qualify any approach that pays insufficient attention to the material and social realities at play. The term “psychologique” is thus a stand-in for critical perspectives that unduly disembodify and depoliticize, as Schapira states, historical or literary investigation. And here we return to a fundamental tension at play in these four reviews. Where one reviewer finds *The Shock* to be “the best book on the real stakes of the Quarrel” (Edelstein), another suggests it deals in “notations psychologiques intemporelles” (Schapira); where one sees a “rigorously analytic and historically empathetic reading of texts” (Kors) another sees a “phénomène de décontextualisation” (Ribard). The four reviews thus enact a significant debate on what constitutes proper historical contextualization and interpretation, and I am most grateful to the authors for advancing that debate through their careful and generous readings of *The Shock*—and am hopeful that it may continue to play some role in furthering this important discussion, among many others.

## NOTES

[1] Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 13; and Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] I develop this line of thought further in “La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes ou la métamorphose de la critique,” *Littérature classique* (forthcoming 2012).

[3] Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009) and *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).

[4] Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades. La Fronde des mots* (Paris: Aubier, 2009 [1985]) and *Les Pouvoirs de la littérature. Histoire d'un paradoxe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); Alain Viala, *Racine: La Stratégie du caméléon* (Paris: Seghers, 1990); Hélène Merlin-Kajman, *Public et littérature en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994); Gilles Declercq, Michel Murat, and Jacqueline Dangel, eds., *La Parole polémique* (Paris: Champion, 2003); Gérard Ferreyrolles, “Le XVIIe siècle et le statut de la polémique,” *Littératures Classiques* 59 (2006): 6-23; Antoine Lilti, “Querelles et controverses. Les formes du désaccord intellectuel à l’époque moderne,” *Mil neuf cent. Revue d’histoire intellectuelle* 25 (2007): 13-28; and Mathilde Bombart, *Guez de Balzac et la querelle des Lettres. Ecriture, polémique et critique dans la France du premier XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2007).

Larry F. Norman  
University of Chicago  
lnorman@uchicago.edu

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