

H-France Review Vol. 9 (June 2009), No. 78

Daniel Brewer, *The Enlightenment Past: Reconstructing Eighteenth-Century French Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. viii + 260 pp. Notes, figures, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-87944-6.

Review by Darrin M. McMahon, Florida State University.

The cover of Daniel Brewer's *Enlightenment Past* depicts, in a black and white photograph by Michael Kenna, a haunting ruin. We see it, dilapidated and decayed, through mist and trees. The remnants of a chateau? A medieval fortress? Perhaps an abandoned monastery? Dix-huitièmistes will recognize it, on closer inspection, as the ruins of the Désert de Retz, one of a number of follies constructed outside Paris on the land of François Racine de Monville, a wealthy notable of the eighteenth century and a friend of many of its leading personages, from Marie Antoinette to Benjamin Franklin. The picture is intended to be doubly symbolic, both of what Brewer describes as the "ruins" of the Enlightenment past and of the elusive quest to recover it intact (p. 205). "The past as such is irrecoverable and thus unknowable," Brewer writes symptomatically (p. 125). The best we can do is to seek to interpret its signs while remaining conscious of the fact that historical discourse itself is like a folly, a construction and simulacra, which often tells us more about the tools and times of its assemblage than those it claims to represent.

Brewer's own work amply illustrates his point, belying—openly and self-reflexively, to be sure—its own postmodern tools and moment, at least as construed in departments of literary and French studies, where Brewer makes his professional home. Foucault, Lyotard, Certeau, Barthes, Ricoeur, and Derrida are called upon to do much of the theoretical heavy-lifting, and the reader will find their implements and argot throughout the work-site of the text, which is replete with references to "mixity" (p. 33), "tropology" (p. 33), "imbrication" (p. 48), "diachrony," "polychrony" (p. 182), and the like. That said, it should also be stressed that Brewer has made a valiant and commendable effort to read widely in French historiography and historical theory. If all scholars—literary, historical, or otherwise—ranged as widely outside their own disciplines as Brewer, we would all be better off.

Yet in the end Brewer is less concerned with the "irrecoverable" past itself than with our own relation to it. "Consequently," he writes, "it is pressing to ask not what the Enlightenment was, but rather how we tell its story. . ." (p. 3). "Situating the Enlightenment in relation to such stories," he continues, "may mean that we must accept that past as a constructed, imaginary object" (p. 3).

That is a risk Brewer is willing to take, and it is one that certainly has pay-offs. For dispensing with the need to try to explain what the Enlightenment was allows Brewer to focus instead on how it has been understood, constructed, and employed. Taking his cue directly from Foucault, Brewer seeks to write a genealogy of the constructions of the Enlightenment from the eighteenth century forward. Or, as he puts it, citing the noted French literary scholar Jean-Marie Goulemot, "I wish to suggest that the Enlightenment can be understood . . . as a 'series of arbitrary reconstructions possessing their own historicity'" (cited on p. 79).

Though "arbitrary" is probably too strong a word, a point to which I shall return in a moment, ceding it

here allows us to see what Brewer sees—that the Enlightenment as a whole has long experienced the fate of what he calls, with respect to one of its greatest luminaries, the “Voltaire effect,” “the act of cultural appropriation in which Voltaire becomes a text referred to more often than read” (p. 168). Through censure and approbation, similarly, the siècle des lumières (or any number of related signifiers, for “The Enlightenment” was not used as a proper noun until the second half of the nineteenth century) became a text of its own that could be marshaled and read in many ways.[1] Reading this unstable text—and reading its readings—becomes for Brewer the crucial enterprise. As he explains:

The critical issue appearing throughout this book involves elaborating a reading strategy that reveals how reference to texts of the past can be understood as the nexus for grasping a present context in its historical dimension. To what use are texts of the past put? How can the past be grasped as/in texts? These are the essential and foundational questions that must be grappled with. . . (p. 79).

Brewer does his grappling with theoretical sophistication and skill, plotting, in nine chapters that serve as interrelated essays but that might also stand alone, series of close and contextualized readings around largely canonical groups of texts. Following the introduction, chapters two through four deal with writings of Enlightenment authors themselves—D’Alembert, Dumarsais, Diderot, Montesquieu—showing how they constructed for themselves new narratives of advents and beginnings, of the present’s relationship to the future and the past, and of change and its novel eighteenth-century agent, the philosophe. Chapters five through eight examine the ways in which eighteenth-century literature and philosophy were tied to and implicated in the revolutionary upheaval, and then trace their subsequent place in the construction of French identity and a French literary canon. A final chapter departs playfully from a rumination on ruins and the eighteenth-century interest in them to bring the story into the twentieth century, with an epilogue reflecting on our own place among the rubble.

Despite the vast scholarship on the Enlightenment as a historical category and force, far too little has been written by way of its long European afterlife in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Brewer is thus to be congratulated for taking up this important task, which pays particularly strong dividends in his rich chapters on the nineteenth-century use and construction of the age of lights and its leading partisans. Beginning in chapter five with a nuanced reading of Jean-François La Harpe’s influential and damning treatment of the philosophes in his apostatic *Lycée, ou Cours de littérature ancienne et moderne* (1799), Brewer devotes the very best pages of the book to analyzing the Enlightenments that emerge in the writings of such important literary critics as Sainte-Beuve and Villemain, and then, later in the Third Republic, as a part of the self-conscious effort to commemorate and expropriate eighteenth-century lights as fathers of the nation integral to French history. He draws on the extant reception histories of key figures like Diderot and Voltaire to do so, while also making tantalizing nods toward a much wider source base—university curricula, school textbooks, newspapers, anthologies and literary histories like Hachette’s *Great French Writers* series, founded in 1887—where constructions of Enlightenment culture and thought were at issue. The work here is largely based on secondary sources, but the thinking is fresh, and historians will find much of value in the reflection on the Enlightenment as a lieu de mémoire of the Third Republic.

One might have hoped for a deeper discussion of the twentieth century, which Brewer glides over rather quickly, with some brief, if insightful, discussion of Cassirer and Edmund Husserl, Aron, Adorno and Horkheimer entre autres. But there is no mention of Vichy and little of what was really the golden age of the construction of the Enlightenment (especially in Germany and the English speaking countries)—the 1940s and 1950s. It is to be hoped that an enterprising historian will write a history of the reception (and creation) of the Enlightenment in the twentieth century—an important task that begs further attention.

Still, Brewer amply demonstrates some of the pay-offs of choosing to treat the Enlightenment as a

“constructed, imaginary object.” Invoking François Furet and his well-known effort to “end” the Revolution so as to be able to study it without endlessly re-fighting its battles (p. 11), Brewer wants to suggest that the Enlightenment is over too, even if he is opened-eyed about the need in the contemporary world to retain some of its better features. But of course many would argue that Furet, like countless French men and women since 1789, declared the Revolution “over” only to dismiss it, drawing on some rather dated (and dubious) characterizations of the Enlightenment and eighteenth-century culture to formulate his charge that the Revolution, “this strange offspring of philosophie,” was destined for Terror from the start. Brewer, to be sure, makes no mention of Augustin Cochin. Yet despite his studied neutrality and best self-critical efforts, he can’t help but adopt at times the language of what many historians would consider the rather dated portrait of the Enlightenment painted by the postmodern theorists he so admires. Certainly, Brewer avoids the crudest postmodern characterizations, and even entertains the suggestion, pace Daniel Gordon, that if the Enlightenment--like Voltaire’s God--didn’t exist, postmodernists would have had to invent it (p. 17).

Arguably they did. Indeed, on Brewer’s own terms, all historical reconstructions are “inventions,” constructed in the service of the present. And so, perhaps unwittingly, Brewer allows that invention, however arbitrary, to color his own. Thus, we learn of the existence of such a thing as an “Enlightenment project” (p. 196), associated with “discursive totalization” and even “a certain totalitarianism and terror.” We are told that the eighteenth-century philosophes set up “unreason as reason’s diametrically opposed other, in order all the better to undertake to eradicate that unreason” (p. 202). And of course we are left with the haunting image of the book’s cover--an Enlightenment folly--symbol of a “project” in ruins that haunts us, and for which we mourn.

But that is where one runs up against the costs associated with the postmodern gambit of treating the past, like all else, solely as an arbitrary textual construction. For without making an effort to ascertain what the Enlightenment really was, Brewer is left without a scale on which to weigh the varying interpretations that surface throughout his book--to decide why this one might be truer (how old fashioned!) or less arbitrary than another. In the absence of a reference frame, all is relative, and so Brewer is led--despite his best intentions--to slip into a present construction of the Enlightenment erected by those hostile to it. Ironically, he ends up adopting its terms. Perhaps the Enlightenment is not over after all.

The irony is even greater in light of the fact that the “present” shaping this particular construction of the Enlightenment is already passed, at least in historical circles. Indeed, what is missing in Brewer’s book is an engagement with the multiple Enlightenments (and multiple modernities) that emerge in the more recent writings of J. G. A. Pocock, Jonathan Israel, Margaret Jacob, Carla Hesse, Emma Rothchild, Sankar Muthu or Jonathan Sheehan, to name only a few of the more innovative scholars who have complicated any simple notion of a unitary (and Franco-centric) Enlightenment project. In the revitalized eighteenth century that emerges collectively from their work, Enlightenments plural contest one another in rival discourses, teeming with vital currents and oppositional forces--forces of religious engagement and rapprochement, of radical critique, of innovative textual and cultural practices, of sense and sensibility. These Enlightenments, too, are undoubtedly a reflection of the present. But by refusing to view the past solely as the mirror of contemporary imaginings, such scholars allow us to see something besides the play of light on follies. Not all of history lies in ruins. And neither, for that matter, does the present.

NOTES

[1] James Schmidt, “Inventing the Enlightenment: British Hegelians, Anti-Jacobins, and the Oxford English Dictionary,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2004): 421-443.

Darrin M. McMahon
Florida State University
darrin.mcmahon@gmail.com

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies 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. The Society for French Historical Studies 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 Review 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. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172