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Zachary Sayre Schiffman, *The Birth of The Past*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. With a foreword by Anthony Grafton. xvi + 316 pp. Notes. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN978-1-4214-0278-9.

Review by Carol Symes, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

“I think the best way to tell the story is by starting at the end, briefly, then going back to the beginning, then periodically returning to the end, maybe filling in different characters’ perspectives throughout – just to, you know, give a bit of dynamism; otherwise, it’s just sort of a linear story.” Spoken by David Ershon, the character played by Steve Coogan in *The Other Guys* (2010), written by Adam McKay (also the film’s director) and Chris Henchy

In his preface to this book, Anthony Grafton applauds the author’s efforts to reach beyond “his fellow specialists” in order to elucidate how “our—that is, the modern Western—vision of the past” came to be. Yet Grafton cites, in his second sentence, Jill Lepore’s recent study of the Tea Party’s conception of American history, noting that most people’s idea of the past is “actually unhistorical” (p. ix).^[1] He thus calls into question Zachary Sayre Schiffman’s fundamental claim, that the Enlightenment discovery of “the idea of anachronism,” defined as an awareness of “the difference between past and present” (p. 3), is widely shared: something “we take . . . for granted,” something with “commonsense status” (p. 1). By “we,” Schiffman means not only academically-trained historians but folks like his non-academic neighbor, who lives in a “lovingly restored” Chicago bungalow “filled with Craftsman and Deco furniture and objects” from the 1920s and ’30s, “who had made himself a living anachronism” through these lifestyle choices and who “could not have done so without an idea of the past” (p. 276) first formulated in the eighteenth century.

It is difficult to ignore the wealth of empirical evidence weighing against the notion that “we” live in a world enlightened by a deep and reflexive habit of historicist thinking, such that “we” do not conflate “the Right to bear Arms” as defined in the Bill of Rights (redacted 1789) with the right to deploy an M16A2 assault rifle, or forbear to utter the word “crusade” save in carefully contextualized ways. As Sam Wineburg has shown, such thinking is an “unnatural act.”^[2] Even those of us trained to recognize anachronism and to avoid a reductive view of the past betray these tendencies all the time. Schiffman himself seems entirely comfortable with the anachronistic constructs dear to him, “the Renaissance” and “the Enlightenment,” and willing to accept simplistic “caricature[s]” (p. 146) of eras less familiar (“the Middle Ages”) if they serve his purpose. Thus we hear about “monkish hands” (p. 3) and “barbarized Latin” (p. 120) giving way to the “more supple and sophisticated” (read: more rigid and antiquarian) Latin of humanists freed from the “feudal” conditions of medieval towns (p. 147); and we are twice confronted (on one page) with alleged representations of Virgil “as a cloistered scholastic in a monk’s cowl” (p. 145)—a typically modern pastiche unimaginable in the medieval period, since practitioners of the scholastic method were usually secular clerics or members of the mendicant orders (not monks) and certainly not cloistered.

The first premise of this book, then—that whatever happened in the Enlightenment constitutes a permanent change that has had a lasting effect on Western conceptions of the past—is highly suspect. It

would be easy to multiply examples such as those above; too easy. Yet one could fairly ask to see some evidence that “the birth of the past,” having occurred, actually began to influence the way history was written in some measurable way. If Schiffman is right, why don’t we regard the nineteenth century as an age of disinterested scholarship untrammelled by the anachronistic demands of chauvinism and imperialism? Because the opposite is true: ideas about the past were harnessed to claims of sovereignty rooted (on the one hand) in teleological narratives of radical continuity and (on the other) in fictions of a “feudal age” from which some “modern” states had emerged triumphant, with a warrant to colonize those peoples still living in a benighted parallel universe.[3] If an awareness of the difference between past and present was expedient, it could be deployed; but if it wasn’t, it was readily abandoned. How are such malleable, modern pasts essentially distinct from the multiple, overlapping pasts that Schiffman ably identifies in the work of the ancient Greek historians featured in this book? How are such modern usable pasts distinct from the willful elision (or invention) of difference characteristic of all official histories, from the court histories of the Old Testament and the propaganda of the Neo-Assyrian Empire to the versions of history crafted by politicians? These histories conflate past and present precisely because they aim to establish legitimacy either through the perceived extension of (or return to) “good, old” ways or (alternatively) via a welcome departure from “bad, old” practices. Schiffman continually asserts that ancient and medieval techniques of historical narration betray an inability to recognize anachronism; but all that we can say with confidence is that such techniques, at least as exhibited in his few chosen examples, were successful in conveying *an impression* of continuity or sameness—whatever the historian wanted to convey, or what his patron or community demanded that he convey. It doesn’t mean that the authors (or audiences) of these narratives couldn’t see through those techniques. We are the ones who are left in the dark.

This brings me to the second major premise of Schiffman’s book, which is that the permanent change in historical thinking produced by the French Enlightenment was only prefigured in the Italian Renaissance; and that prior practitioners of the historians’ craft in the two previous eras he discusses, “Antiquity” and “Christianity,” were incapable of it. This, he asserts, is where the “novelty of [his] argument lies” (p. 4). But it is really an iteration of a very familiar argument told in a very familiar way, with reference to the usual suspects: Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, Augustine, Gregory of Tours, and Bede. Schiffman then jumps—again, the strategic leap will be familiar to readers of Harold Bloom or Stephen Greenblatt—to Francesco Petrarca and, after nods to Lorenzo Valla and Machiavelli, to Jean Bodin, before bringing on stage his star witnesses, Montaigne and Montesquieu. Notice something interesting about this trajectory: the intellectuals surveyed in the first half of the book could fairly be called historians (though they were all, in their own ways, so much more), but those in the second half of the book are poets, political theorists, jurists, or philosophers. Schiffman is comparing apples and oranges, and it’s therefore not surprising that the apples don’t look or taste like the oranges. It would have been more appropriate to compare theorists to theorists, historians to historians; but the card-carrying historians working in the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries would not have helped to advance Schiffman’s argument (even Vico needs to be sidelined), while many ancient and medieval witnesses *not* included in this survey would complicate matters still further. Again, examples could be multiplied *ad nauseum*.

But even if one stays within Schiffman’s preferred parameters and pays close attention to the contexts and strategies of historical production in any place and time (that is, avoiding anachronism insofar as that is possible) a work such as Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 730) can be understood as a manifestly agenda-driven account of selected events whose stated purpose was to create a fiction of Christian unity among the diverse peoples of Britain and to validate the mission of a Rome-sponsored English (not Celtic) church with twin epicenters of power in Kent and Northumbria. In other words, this narrative was *meant* to be homogenizing and anachronistic: which means that Bede, too, had an “idea of anachronism” but chose to suppress it for very good reasons. Or if the place to look for historical thinking is *not* in works of history but in the sort of writings Schiffman favors in the book’s latter sections, then it would make more sense to look at Bede’s treatise on the reckoning of time or his

Biblical commentaries for one's evidence. Indeed, the very modes of Biblical interpretation developed by Bede and his successors were dependent on an idea of anachronism, for how else could exegetes make distinctions between a literal (historical) reading and an allegorical or typological one? So Hugh of Saint-Victor (c. 1094-1141), author of a widely-read interpretive textbook, taught his students to recognize that many passages in the Old Testament, particularly, would be hard to construe because they reflect specific linguistic idioms that do not translate well into Latin, as well as the different circumstances in which the ancient Hebrews lived (*Didascalicon* VI.10).^[4]

I venture to guess that neither classicists nor medievalists will deem Schiffman's overarching argument to be accurate or compelling. But we are not his target interlocutors; he is really addressing those who have claimed that a definitive shift in historical thinking happened either slightly earlier, in Renaissance Italy (with Petrarch as its prophet), or as a product of German Romanticism (with Johann Gottfried Herder and his followers). This, too, is a familiar, and strangely old-fashioned, argument over the drawing of modernity's national and temporal boundaries. And it is in keeping with the old-fashioned pleasures delivered by this extended essay, which is vividly written, gently provocative, and gravely attentive to certain canonical texts, mostly in translation (only those in French are examined in any linguistic detail). It is also limpidly personal, as Schiffman tells us that he first thought about this subject in graduate school; as such, it is a Petrarchan love-letter to an older era of scholarship, studded with reverent allusions to Jacob Burckhardt, Erich Auerbach, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Arnaldo Momigliano, and Thomas M. Greene—a syllabus from the 1970s, almost uncontaminated by postmodern critical perspectives. If read as series of reflections on how the past was evoked in some Western classics, it can be engaging and useful.

NOTES

[1] Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[2] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2001).

[3] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[4] Translated as *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Guide to the Arts* by Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 148-9.

Carol Symes
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
symes@illinois.edu

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