Essay Review

Dmitri Levitin


Academic book reviewing is by and large a placid business; fights are infrequent, and criticism is usually swaddled in oleaginous, noncommittal praise, itself the expression of no deep thought, but only of the professional respect accorded to those who go through the motions without making too great a fool of themselves. It is with some surprise, then, that one reads William Bulman’s long online review (November 2016) of Dmitri Levitin’s monograph Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science, and Levitin’s vitriolic reply, published shortly thereafter, each running to over 4,000 words.¹

The two had been on friendly terms; each thanked the other in his acknowledgements, and Levitin had cited Bulman’s unpublished doctoral thesis in his enormous review essay of 2012, ‘From Sacred History to the History of Religion’. But now the contrast between two modes of intellectual history exploded off the screen. Bulman’s mode takes an accommodationist attitude to the big concepts that shape our views of the past, embracing terms like ‘Enlightenment’ both because they are enshrined in academic historiography and because they have become foundational, well beyond academia, to the just-so stories of today’s cultural and political ideologies. As a traditional idea comes under fire for failing to do justice to this or that text, thinker, or political arena, the accommodationist seeks to reshape and refine it, rather than rejecting it altogether. Thus Bulman writes in his 2015 monograph, Anglican Enlightenment, that the ‘notion of Enlightenment’ can be adapted to cover the diversity of its manifestations ‘without rendering [it] so pluralized, vague, or apolitical that it becomes incoherent, useless, or uninteresting … Whatever its value as a term of analysis, it seems unwilling to retreat in the fact of relentless scholarly

¹ http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/2023.
subdivisions, warnings, and denials. We might as well make the best of it.2 In particular, Bulman has helped to promote a recent turn seeking to reconcile Enlightenment with religion, both in his monograph and in his edited collection God in the Enlightenment (2016).3 In the introduction to that volume, after acknowledging (4–7) the limitations of the classic secularising model of the Enlightenment articulated by Peter Gay and Jonathan Israel, Bulman insists, as before: ‘The recognition that Enlightenment came in different and often antagonistic forms is a valuable one for all sorts of reasons, but if it ends up dissolving “the Enlightenment” or “Enlightenment” as a phenomenon, the entire analytical framework loses much of its value.’ (11)

The virtues of the approach favoured by Bulman and his peers–talented historians such as Jonathan Sheehan, Robert Ingram, Dan Edelstein, and recently Anton Matytsin, to say nothing of the many who have taken similar approaches to other grand historiographical concepts, from Renaissance to Romanticism–are ethical and social rather than strictly epistemological. It casts the business of history as properly dialogical, constructive, and affirmative, an engagement with the present as much as the past; the aim is to work within existing narratives, to treat every perspective as having something to offer. This kind of investigation is therefore a constant and tricky balancing between new facts and the array of stories already on the table, but it is a game from which few are excluded.

Levitin runs with a different crowd. Dirk van Miert has identified him as ‘the product of what we might start calling a “school”’, whose members will be familiar to readers of ERoL, if not on its editorial board: Anthony Grafton (perhaps not coincidentally, Bulman’s doctoral supervisor), Scott Mandelbrote, Jean-Louis Quantin, Theodor Dunkelgrün, Jill Kraye, Richard Serjeantson, Kristine Haugen, Henk Jan de Jonge, Nick Hardy, Mordechai Feingold, Joanna Weinberg, Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, Martin Mulsow, Noel Malcolm, William Poole, Erik Jorink, Christoph Lüthy, and Hiro Hirai.4 But if Levitin does belong to a school it will be highly ironic, because much of Ancient Wisdom is directed against the historiographical value of schools such as ‘Cambridge Platonism’, labels such as ‘Epicureanism’, and grand categories, of which the Enlightenment (including the ‘early Enlightenment’) is only the most notorious culprit.

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