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Through the Walls of Time: A Short Reflection on Writing Early Modern Intellectual History

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Abstract

This short piece takes a longstanding problem from the history of ideas, *viz.* the use of contemporary concepts in descriptions of past phenomena, and discusses its implications for broader intellectual history. Scholars have argued that being transparent about anachronism can be a first step towards solving the issue. I would argue, however, that it may actually interfere with proper historical interpretation. As a case study, we shall explore what happens when a modern concept like ‘culture’ is applied to pre-modern intellectual processes. As the idea of *cultural transfer* is prominent in recent Jewish historiography, we will focus on exemplary early modern intermediary Menasseh ben Israel, and ask ourselves whether his supposed ‘brokerage’ (a notion taken from twentieth-century anthropology) brings us closer to understanding his work. As an alternative, I propose ‘*bricolage*,’ again a central analytical tool in modern anthropology but, as I hope to show, one with unexpected hermeneutical potential.

Keywords

bricolage – brokerage – history of ideas – Late Scholasticism – Menasseh ben Israel

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Introduction

Anachronism is the double-edged sword of historiography. On the one hand, the pretence of being able to answer present-day questions is history's main *raison d'être*, its driving force, its ultimate charm. On the other, it constitutes its fundamental flaw. When no longer rooted in current issues, historical research soon loses its relevance and power to communicate. On the downside, those current preoccupations also tend to—consciously or subconsciously—colour our perceptions of the past, sometimes with highly questionable results.¹ The problem becomes particularly acute when we use generic concepts (like liberalism, modernity, etc.) to describe concrete historical phenomena.² While on the one hand such concepts help us classify events and arrange them into meaningful patterns (in short, while they enable us to write history),³ they also suggest a timeless universality, coherence and continuity that belie the unique reality of people, places, and periods. Given our obvious cognitive limits, it is utopian to think that historians will ever stop 'classify[ing] the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar'.⁴ Yet occasionally they do make an effort by exposing the conceptual frameworks that lie beneath their classifications. When methodological rigour cannot prevent anachronism, being honest about it seems to be the next best thing.⁵

This short essay is meant as a critical exercise in transparency: does owing up to anachronism suffice, or is it an easy way out that may even undermine our interpretations? Without going into detail, I will sketch what happens when we apply a modern household concept like 'culture' to pre-modern intellectual processes. I shall begin by defining the modern bias in our conception of culture. Zooming in on one popular subcategory: cultural transfer, we shall chart the implications of its use in an early modern context. Secondly, we

1 An extreme case of projecting current ideologies on previous societies in order to justify political action is discussed in G. Algazi, 'Otto Brunner: "Konkrete Ordnung" und "Sprache der Zeit"', in P. Schöttler, ed., *Geschichte als Legitimationswissenschaft, 1918–1945* (Frankfurt a. M. 1997) 166–203.

2 See esp. Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge 1978); and idem, *Visions of Politics, vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge 2002).

3 J.V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford 1981) 127. For an outline of Skinner's position and various responses, see E. Åsard, 'Quentin Skinner and His Critics. Some Notes on a Methodological Debate,' *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 2 (1987) 101–116.

4 Skinner, *Visions*, 58.

5 Cf. the insistence on such 'honesty' as propounded by A. Betti and H. van den Berg, 'Modelling the History of Ideas,' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming).

must consider alternatives that may take us beyond our own conceptual confines, and help us fuse our horizon with that of our historical subjects. As an early modern benchmark I have chosen two works by exemplary middleman Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657), which are often read as part of an intense cross-cultural conversation: his Spanish *Conciliador* (1632–1651) and Latin *De Creatione Problemata*, published 1635. Does Menasseh's supposed brokerage bring us closer to the nature of these works, or does it interfere with their proper understanding?

Modern Culture: Harbour or Voyage?

Since the early nineteenth century, the Western notion of culture has been intimately linked with the idea of nation.⁶ This *zuta* is not the place to tell the story of that marriage; we should, however, briefly recall how this national affiliation has affected our perceptions of culture. Overall one could say that modernist thinking tended to view culture as the diapositive of the ideal nation: unique and united, an organic, holistic system of values and achievements, built around one immutable spiritual core. Like the state that enclosed it, national culture was neatly demarcated and governed by a strong sense of authenticity versus deviance, of viability versus decadence. Again in imitation of political reality, the encounter between these supposedly impermeable civilizations was described in terms of conflict, a violent—if productive—clash of cultures rather than a peaceable trading of spiritual goods.

If postmodern thinkers successfully questioned the normativity of the modernist conflict model, they did not relinquish its monadic premise. The one-to-one relation between culture and nationality was basically left intact, albeit that stable, authentic national culture now stood revealed as ultimately porous, dynamic and hybrid—a voyage rather than a harbour, if we dare abuse Toynbee's famous quote. Following Bourdieu, the attention further shifted from the sublime autonomy of culture to its human production and circulation. Within this constellation, a vital role was set aside for the broker, the native middleman known from anthropological expeditions, who now began to make a career out of negotiating between more abstract cultural systems.⁷

6 For a transnational survey of European understandings of 'culture' and 'civilization,' see P. den Boer, 'Vergelijkende begripsgeschiedenis,' in P. den Boer, ed., *Beschaving. Een geschiedenis van de begrippen hoofsheid, heusheid, beschaving en cultuur* (Amsterdam 2001) 15–78.

7 M. Vovelle, 'Cultural Intermediaries,' in M. Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities* (Oxford 1990) 114–125.

In academic circles, cultural change henceforth was discussed in terms of transfer rather than conflict. Still, in the postmodern *Umwertung* of European nationalism, culture itself remained surprisingly static—a Sleeping Beauty, only awakening to her full potential under the broker's kiss.

In *histoire croisée*, one of the latest extensions of the cultural transfer model, interaction has become the prime motivation and engine of culture.⁸ In an attempt at countering 'the challenge of transnationalism,' founding fathers Werner and Zimmermann propose to study the reciprocal embrace (*Verflechtung*) of cultural agents, not the simple vivifying kiss. Instead of a limited number of clear-cut polarities, they distinguish a theoretically endless series of—local, national and global—*Interdependenzketten* (chains of interdependence), which together produce an unwieldy range of hybrid offspring (*métissage*). Favouring complexity over symmetry, transnationalism over nationalism, heterogeneity over monoculture, this entangled history may be the ideal methodology for the post-colonial global village. Being a correction (and continuation) of the nationalist framework, it seems less suited for capturing the spirit of early modernity, when national culture was still—at best—a latent 'proto' category in European thought.⁹

Broker or *Bricoleur*

In theory, in spelling out our anachronist bias we have cleared the ground for further study of Menasseh ben Israel as an early modern cultural broker. It is in this capacity that he appears in various recent publications.¹⁰ Because of that focus, these studies occasionally suffer from what Skinner has called the 'mythology of prolepsis,' which means that they sometimes confuse Menasseh's actual words and deeds with their perceived historical significance. When this

8 M. Werner and B. Zimmermann, 'Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung: Der Ansatz der *histoire croisée* und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen,' *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002) 607–636.

9 From a general historian's perspective, thinking about pre-modern (regional, urban, ethnic or religious) culture in terms other than 'culture' will seem awkward, if not pedantic. However, since our modern conception of culture has no equivalent (or false friends, at most) in pre-modern thought, the conceptual historian would do well to avoid its use, on pain of anachronism and prolepsis.

10 Most recently S. Rauschenbach, *Judentum für Christen: Vermittlung und Selbstbehauptung Menasseh ben Israels in den gelehrten Debatten des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin 2012); and B.F. Fischer, *The Centering of the Bible in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: Jewish Religion, Culture and Scholarship* (PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania 2011) ch. 3, 108–155.

abstraction interferes with hermeneutics proper, the resulting interpretation may be way off the mark. Transparency is not always enough, as the following example will show.

The four-volume *Conciliador*, a long-term project in which Menasseh tried to harmonize all ‘mutually repugnant’ passages in the Bible, has enjoyed a mixed modern reception. While early studies situated the work within a volatile *converso* context,¹¹ later scholars have pointed at its sustained dialogue with Christian scholarship.¹² An interesting test-case for the validity of either position is *Quaestio* 6, where Menasseh confronted the plural in Genesis 1:26 (‘Let us make man’) with the emphatic singular in Deuteronomy 32:39 (‘See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god with Me’). The verse from Genesis, he granted, had confused interpreters ‘by seemingly multiplying the First Cause, who is the only, sole, and most perfect unity.’¹³ Convinced of Menasseh’s interfaith mission, Noah Rosenbloom understood these words as a ‘not-so-veiled trinitarian allusion,’¹⁴ which ‘only made sense’ when read as a rebuttal of the Christian belief in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.¹⁵ However, the merging of Neoplatonism and Kabbalah in Menasseh’s subsequent exposé suggests that he was not so much thinking of Christian dogma as borrowing from Abraham Cohen Herrera, whose thoroughly Jewish *Puerta del Cielo* (Gate of Heaven) was printed in Amsterdam around 1635.¹⁶ The details of Menasseh’s argumentation need not concern us here. We must, however, specify why the second interpretation should be considered the more plausible of the two.

11 For the *Conciliador* as a refutation of Uriel da Costa’s heterodoxy, see C. Gebhardt, *Die Schriften des Uriel da Costa* (Amsterdam etc. 1922) xxixff, 188 n. 279. Gebhardt’s view was adopted by Cecil Roth, Israel Revah, and Isaiah Sonne.

12 Thus, whereas Fischer reads the work as an echo of current Christian ‘anxieties about the infallibility of the Bible’ (*The Centering*, 108), S. Rauschenbach, ‘Mediating Jewish Knowledge. Menasseh ben Israel and the Christian *Respublica Litteraria*,’ *Jewish Quarterly Review* 102.4 (2012) 561–588, esp. 568 considers it a careerist plea for interfaith Bible study. Twenty years earlier, N.H. Rosenbloom highlighted Menasseh’s efforts at safeguarding the young Amsterdam congregation from Christian dogma, in ‘Discreet Theological Problems in Menasseh ben Israel’s “Conciliador”,’ *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 58 (1992) 143–191.

13 *Conciliador* I, 18.

14 Rosenbloom, ‘Discreet Theological Problems,’ 175.

15 *Ibid.*, 178.

16 For Cohen Herrera’s merging of the three Neo-Platonic hypostases with the first Kabbalistic emanations (no trinity here!), see A. Altmann, ‘Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key,’ *Hebrew Union College Annual* 53 (1982) 317–355, esp. 327–328.

For this we must turn to Menasseh's study, to his writing desk and the books that were on it. Let us glance over his shoulder while he worked on the 1635 *De creatione problemata*, a text that is closer to the *Conciliador* than title and format suggest. Outwardly, *De creatione* begs to be studied in terms of career criticism and brokerage. Menasseh's choice to write the book in Latin and the effusive self-presentation in the preliminaries indicate that he aimed at a Christian readership, hoping to open up new professional networks. The actual text, however, stays remarkably close to Menasseh's *converso* home. In trying to supply thirty beliefs about creation with a rational basis, it addresses an urgent problem in Late Scholastic thought, which continued to trouble New Jewish authors before Spinoza: the necessity to synchronize theological dogma with philosophical truth.¹⁷

Once we recognize *De creatione*'s indebtedness to Late Scholastic epistemology, the Scholastic method employed throughout the *Conciliador* also becomes clear. Rather than trying to save the credibility of Scripture by rationalizing its contradictions, the book embraces these contradictions as ever so many occasions for further exploration. In good Scholastic fashion, the logical opposition between Genesis 1:26 and Deuteronomy 32:39 is taken as a starting point for verifying, through 'medieval' dialectical reasoning, the true nature of God. Inevitably this digressive format, which allowed Menasseh to explore a wide range of topics by conflating an even wider range of sources, yielded a text that was neither focussed nor consistent. As a work of biblical scholarship, the *Conciliador* resembles the polyphonous *Miqra'ot gedolot* more than the single, persuasive commentary. As a synthesis, it is a prime example of *bricolage*, i.e. of countering a challenge or creating something new by using materials that happen to be at hand, regardless of their variety and suitability to the project.¹⁸ In Menasseh's case, the challenge consisted in having to renegotiate epistemic authority in an embryonic Jewish community—what was (Jewish) truth, how

17 For the debate on revelation, reason, and authority in Da Costa's *Examen*, its refutation by Samuel da Silva, Immanuel Aboab's *Nomologia* and the *Conciliador*, all written between 1624–1632, see D. Kromhout and I.E. Zwiép, 'God's Word Confirmed. Authority, Truth and the Text of the Early Modern Jewish Bible,' in D. van Miert et al., eds., *God's Word Questioned: Biblical Criticism and Scriptural Authority in the Dutch Golden Age* (forthcoming). NB: the classic reconciliation of theology and philosophy was formulated in *Disputationes metaphysicae* (1597) by the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez, who features prominently in Menasseh's work.

18 'The bricoleur addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours'; C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago 1966) 20.

was it established and on what grounds should it be accepted?¹⁹ His toolbox included a Late Scholastic mind and the oddly accumulative library of a first-generation New Jew.²⁰ The result was a highly personal collage, the totality of which easily transcended the sum of its disparate parts.

More than any of Menasseh's writings, the *Conciliador* gives us a glimpse of the *bricoleur* behind the scholar, of the solitary artisan that anticipates every public intellectual. I believe it is in the observation and description of this private craftsman that the key to true understanding lies, not only of Menasseh's writings, but of the work of every scholar, including our own. Monitoring the genesis of texts as they emerge in and from their personal contexts allows us to reconstruct what was at stake for the scholar *before* it was appropriated and judged by the wider world. It means not having to choose between a textualist and a contextualist analysis—one of the key dilemmas in intellectual history—and above all enables us to distinguish historical *meaning* from modern *significance*.²¹ When we peer through the walls of time, we must first look into the scholar's book-lined cell. Other types of analysis can follow, in terms of typology, of transfer and brokerage, of Theory even. But never the twain shall interfere: the *bricoleur* always comes first.

Conclusion

The (secondary) broker and the (primary) *bricoleur*, little do they have in common. The former is your typical middleman, nudging towards change as he mediates between parties; the latter, by contrast, tinkers in private. While the broker negotiates between (collective, constructed) cultures, the *bricoleur* is content to spin his own subjective 'web of significances,' as Clifford Geertz famously defined culture.²² As I have tried to show, adopting this Geertzian definition and taking it beyond anthropological 'thick description'²³ into the realm of intellectual history may offer a better, more direct access to early

19 Cf. L. Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford 2012).

20 Cf. D. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Oxford 2000) 278–314 (ch. 6: 'A Patchwork Culture: Iberian, Jewish, and Dutch Elements in Peaceable Coexistence').

21 Cf. Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,' *History and Theory* 8.1 (1969) 3–53.

22 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York 1973) 5.

23 *Ibid.*, ch. 1.

modern meaning, unspoiled by modern theory and judgment. Yet, as they say in German: *ein bisschen Verlust ist immer*. When the distant mirror makes way for the objective lens and we, the viewers, get out of sight, history will lose some of its poignancy. And that is where the broker steps in. Anachronism *is* the double-edged sword of historiography.