



History

The Terror of History

Teofilo F. Ruiz

Princeton University Press

978-0-691-12413-1

(September 30, 2011)

Day-to-day existence confronts humanity with a phalanx of perils—wars, plagues, floods, droughts, earthquakes, economic upheavals. The list is as endless as human fears. In this breezily written study, Ruiz, who teaches history, Spanish, and Portuguese at UCLA, examines the various psychological devices people resort to in order to endure what he calls “the terror of history.”

Looking specifically at western civilization, he cites religion, sensual indulgence, and the pursuit of beauty and knowledge (aesthetics) as the three most common defenses people erect to get through calamities and live with the awareness that death is inevitable. The categories aren’t all that clear cut, he acknowledges, since one may be religious, sensual, *and* an aesthete at the same time. He notes, for example, that “the liturgy of the Mass, and prayer itself, combine the expectation of spiritual uplift with a whole range of sensory stimuli [and] aesthetic appeals.” Still, as he sees it, one mode tends to be dominant.

The tone of this book is more ruminative than pedagogic. Ruiz sprinkles his text with personal anecdotes and observations but never advocates one approach over the other. This is not, he stresses, a self-help manual. Although religious in his youth, Ruiz is now a genially tolerant, dark-humored atheist.

Having established his three types of emotional security blankets, Ruiz then shows each of them in action against a historical backdrop that extends from ancient Greece to modern America. If there is an element missing here it is his failure to pay sufficient attention to the great mass of people who come to terms with being human early on and who don’t fret much about it afterward. For them, life is just another day to get through as joyfully or painlessly as possible, not an ongoing dread.

The comfort—even delight—of this book is that it doesn’t scold or trivialize people’s often pathetic attempts to escape their own mortality. It simply wishes them to be aware of

possibilities. “In truth, I am as clueless about the world in my advanced years as I was early in life,” Ruiz confesses. He is a seeker, too.

Edward Morris