

The Agonistics of the Canon - An Eighteenth-Century Identitary Feat

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Abstract

The article deals with the emergence of the eighteenth-century literary canon as an αγών accompanying the collapse of the isomorphic model. As a cultural institution, the canon asserts itself in tandem with the 'new divinity' called criticism and the separation of the arts from the sciences. These classic modern processes confirm the Whiggish view of history and the institutionalization of literature as such, contemporaneously with the establishment of aesthetics. Periodization and the classic – romantic opposition, both constitutive of further modernization, are also touched upon.

Keywords: *ancient, classic, modern, canon, isomorphic model, cultural institution, the institutionalization of literature, classic modernity.*

It could be argued that the English literary canon, an eighteenth-century cultural invention, comes into being in a long process of symbolic struggle. With a Bloomian tinge, this αγών points to the dialectics of tradition and invention, a phenomenon which has come down to us as the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. English has preserved it in the celebrated Swiftian formula the *battle of the books*. The tension holding between the past- and the present-gear types of culture engaged in this clash features against the backdrop of the problematic seventeenth century, the time of the Scientific Revolution. In my own critical vocabulary, this is the *collapse of the isomorphic model*, basically the modern abandonment of the inherited Grand Theory as the 'beauty = the supreme good = truth equation' [9, 193]. As Basil Willey observes, 'whereas for the seventeenth century "Truth" seemed to be the key-word', for the following 'it was "Nature" [10, 7], 'the universe com[ing] more and more to be regarded as the Great Machine' [10, 11].

The very Weltanschauung of the enlightened age is a metonym of its mania for taxonomic order(ing). The legacy left by Addison and Steele in the first third of the century points to this. The critical attitude they bequeath focuses on simplicity, with *verba-res* clarity as a crucial value, the social context of criticism, with the sense of authorial responsibility looming large, and the cultivation of a wide audience as a sign of growing civility [see 6]. In a few decades from their departure from this world, we read Boswell's lines about the newly accepted word *civilization* in Dr. Johnson's dictionary. On March 23, 1772, we learn, the lexicographer would not accept the entry *civilization*, but only *civility*. Boswell must have worked hard on the matter, but eventually came out victorious, with the derivative of *to civilize* included as the antonym of *barbarity*.

The late Sir Isaiah Berlin sees in eighteenth-century epistemology two ways: there is the analytic claiming that knowledge is ‘necessary, in which case it rests on formal criteria and can give no information about the world’, and there is the synthetic claiming ‘to give information about the world, in which case it can be no more than probable’. The one is the *a priori*, the other the *a posteriori* way. The one pertains to the purely deductive discipline as used by the formal sciences, the other deals with empirical questions of fact, which are ‘answered by the special sciences, or at another level by ordinary common sense’ [1, 24]. The literary canon sits at the crossroads of the two, at once displaying copious samples *and* unveiling the ambition of keeping them hierarchically in place. In a way, the canon shares the territory lived on by antiquarianism, with its myriad information, details, particulars and every sort of minutiae, and the burgeoning philosophy of history, with its thirst for rigour, whether in an overall or/and subjacent pattern(s), in hierarchies or/and in classes of events, agents of historical change, places turning into sites of memory and, last but not least, documents arresting their memory for the generations to come. Monuments and documents, in the Foucauldian vocabulary of cultural identity, these cultural institutions serve the logic, the identity and the functions of the canon, an eighteenth-century identitary feat.

The *querelle* is a significant landmark, coextensive, as it is, with the birth of ‘modern thought as such’ [see 7] owing to the subsequent separation of the arts from the sciences and the concurrent assertion of the doctrine of progress in knowledge. We call this Whiggery now. For a fairly faithful image of the time, we need to understand human progress as associated with the concepts of ‘age’ and ‘period’, in a concatenation of chronological *qua* causal temporal units. Also pertaining to the vision of the day there are the gradual departure from received rules and norms to the benefit of promoting taste as paragon of beauty, and, in the last instance, institutionalizing literature in the sense in which we use the term nowadays.

Such were the progressive steps encouraged by the Whiggish thinkers of Fielding’s and Sterne’s England within decades of the new discipline called aesthetics treading onto the stage of the public sphere. In tandem with literary criticism, both independent intellectual endeavours, it saluted the victory of the moderns. From our vantage point, this meant debunking the universal authority of the ancients. Instead local specificity became currency, the classical languages were replaced by the vernaculars, the world came to be seen through the prism of historical relativism and plurality of identities to be accepted. All this had been cultural baggage dormant between the classic antiquity and the Renaissance.

The symbolic struggle – the *αγών* – of the English literary canon meets its symmetrical equivalent across the Channel. Reputedly in love with England, in a process known as Anglomania at the time, France sends signals of jealous reactions. They accumulate to feed the ‘*querelle d’Homère*’, a syntagm betraying a growing awareness of the common cultural soil later defined by Arnold in terms of Hebraism and Hellenism. While the former actually meant the Judeo-Christian, rather than simply the Hebrew, the latter covered the Greco-Roman tradition, rather than merely the Hellenic one. We find both duplicate threads in the battle of the old and the new books best advertised in Paris as the *querelle d’Homère*. The outstanding thing about it is that the guarantee of the contemporaneous canon, just en route to being certified as an institution, is to be identified in the classic antiquity, revisited and even revised in order to prove the case.

In France, Boileau, the supporter of the ancients, as we read in his *Art poétique* of 1674, is braved by Perrault and Fontenelle, who place their bet on the moderns. The former defies the Greek classics to praise French folklore, and defends his homeland against ‘rebels who prefer the ancient works to their own’, as he states in *Parallèle des anciens et de modernes* (1688-96). This doxographic line is also traceable in Bovier de Fontenelle’s *Dialogues des morts*, a formula that has made currency in Western culture, with Greenblatt’s celebrated use of it as a recent re-

enactment. Briefly, Fontenelle welcomes the novel and the fairytale as the triumph of French over Latin, of the new over the old spirit, of the modern canonicals over the ancient classics.

In England, *Some Thoughts upon receiving the Essay of Ancient and Modern Learning* is committed to paper by William Temple in 1690 as an express retort to Fontenelle's exemplary parallel. In its turn, this combative writing is reinforced by the author's private secretary, Jonathan Swift. *The Battle of the Books* comes from the print in 1704 as a prolegomenon to *A Tale of a Tub*. Conceived as a satire, the Swiftian battle rises on preceding texts in broad line of the same ilk. It resorts to parodic tricks and lays bare epic values by playing them down in the mock heroic manner. A skirmish bursts out in the King's Library, the modern substitute for the celebrated Alexandria library. The moderns will not concede it to the ancients, whom they would fain see defeated and out of the battlefield for good. On the modern note, the gravity of the situation is diluted by the comic insertion of a parallel fight between a spider and a bee. This allegorical addition gives a new dimension to the canonical conflict.

Standing for the modern author, the spider weaves a fabric out of its own entrails. The bee, instead, is the classic fed by mother nature, or rather, culture's plenty. Here is a re-reading of a classic fable, the like of which we have seen, in recent times, at least in M.H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp*. In the track of mock heroic texts, this palimpsest of allegorical-symbolic clashes involves insects and humans, ancients and moderns, works and authors. To the spider and bee more combatants are brought in, whose names are Homer, Pindar, Aristotle and Plato opposing Milton, Dryden, Descartes and Hobbes. To crown the paradigmatic battle of the books, the fighters in the two camps are all under the control of a newly devised divinity whose name is Criticism. Swift keeps things in clever balance and refrains from taking sides, though the skirmish ends in the apparent victory of the ancients, if with the suspension of the conflict.

The 'battle for Homer' pushes to the fore Houdart de la Motte and Mme Dacier. Acting as translator-'improver' of the poet of poets, the former crosses swords with his female colleague, a partisan of Homer translated in the 'primitive' and 'rough' manner of the original. To her, la Motte is the salon practitioner of artificial geometry, a traitor of Homer's historical naturalness, which she hastens to defend in *Des Causes de la corruption du goût* (1714). Theirs is a battle throwing into the arena geometry against history, forced rationalism against natural drives. By way of consequence, there are two Homers to assess from now on and, as this exemplary schizophrenia assumes shape, what we now call periodization does as well. There is the 'classical', as there is the 'modern' Homer. The one is model bard of the venerable antiquity, the praise of a *canonical homage* all through. The other is to be investigated historically by literary scholars' of the so-called 'historical movement' [2, 112].

This gives rise to a further categorization: one grouping condenses round the concept of a 'primitive' Homer [see 5], inferior only to Ossian! 'Primitive' cultures gain critical attention, like the Celtic and Scandinavian. 'Medievalism' gains terrain as a way of being modern (sic): Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethan dramatists, considered exotic, because 'primitive', rank in a different category than the domesticized Homer turned 'Christian' or/and 'rational'. Patriotic revaluations of Shakespeare in parallel with the critical view of Homer underline the 'spontaneous (...) fertile imagination' that he shares with the 'frantic' Ossian [2, 120].

Critics aware of the 'modernity' of the contemporary scene make up a second category persuaded that humanity has ascended to civility in the course of the ages. This typically Enlightenment view of progress is expressed by Thomas Blackwell, whose *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735) puts forth the thesis of Homer's superiority over all the other poets known by humanity. Blackwell mentions 'the different Periods or Steps, naturally succeeding in the Progression of Manners' [7, 65]. In this scheme Homer appears not simply as a case in excellence, but also one in progress! The period style inaugurated by Blackwell has

been seen as 'a prevailing set of *norms* inscribed in a limited catalogue of canonical authorities' [4, 565].

By and large, *the classical*, and *the modern*, *canon* look to periodization as opening the category of 'ancient' writing to more 'primitive' texts: 'runic', 'Hebrew', popular balladry, Ossianic writing and other such 'non-classic' productions. The *ancient vs. modern* dichotomy thus turns into the *classic vs. romantic* one. This will become fundamental to the *debates on canonical matters* in the late century, in anticipation of the romantic manifestos. In principle, by 'classic' is understood the harmonious unity of the spirit declaimed by Winckelmann, while by 'romantic' is designated the divided and alienated modern self. It is on this typological basis that the Germanic will be seen in opposition to the Latin element, the former felt as 'primitive', 'romantic' 'northern', the latter, 'refined', 'classic', 'southern'. To the former the figure of Shakespeare, the 'royalist', is later symbolically attached, in contrast with the 'classic' and 'republican' Milton. This becomes the *central canonical pair of writers* of eighteenth-century English letters.

The battle is waged with varying amounts of weaponry and determination all through Alexander Pope's and Laurence Sterne's century. The border between two aesthetic views is assuming contour, with the modern spirit as the undeniable winner. A Copernican revolution in aesthetics occurs in the mid-century, after the proclamation of the latter's full rights by Baumgarten in 1750. Universal objective beauty is dislocated by individual subjective beauty, and rule-abiding delight makes room for emotion. Beauty finds its foundation not in immutable laws of proportion and harmony, but rather in the accidental, the unexpected, the irregular, the weird and the mysterious. To classical reason romantic imagination stands as a pillar against which the moderns will lean to enjoy the taste of novelty. Their victory is the victory of difference, of the 'other', whether as the sublime, the grotesque, the savage, the excessive, or the ugly. As it traverses the romantic territory, symbolism will later on only naturally utter its manifesto as an echo of the '*querelle des anciens et des modernes*'.

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Agonistica Canonului – o victorie identitară a secolului al XVIII-lea

Rezumat

Articolul se ocupă de nașterea canonului literar al secolului al XVIII-lea ca αγών ce însoțește colapsul modelului izomorfic. Ca instituție culturală canonul se afirmă în tandem cu ‘noua divinitate’ numită critică și cu separarea artelor de științe. Aceste procese ale modernității clasice confirmă viziunea progresistă (Whiggish) asupra istoriei, ca și instituționalizarea literaturii ca atare, în același timp cu stabilizarea esteticii. Sunt, totodată, discutate periodizarea și opoziția clasic – romantic, ambele constitutive ale modernizării ulterioare.