

The Long Modernity: The Valorization of Time and Memory from Early to Late Modernity¹

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Abstract

This paper proposes the “long modernity” as a concept in the Modernity Discourse subtending currently used terms like “early modernity” or “late modernity”. In between these extremes such terms as “classic modernity” aka the Enlightenment-Romanticism and “high modernity” aka Victorianism are unavoidable and necessary in our critical taxonomy. As it looks at the text(ure) of “the long modernity”, the demonstration gravitates round crucial moments in the process, from the late Middle Ages to nowadays, with the cultural institutions “invented” by each phase, from the university and the marketplace on to the novel, the public sphere, the railway and the airplane, to the IT means, from, that is, physical to virtual cultural texts, all responsible for our modern identity.

Keywords: *modernity, tradition, history of ideas, time, memory*

“It is an ancient Mariner,/ And he stoppeth one of three”. How many times have we heard, read, commented on, or looked in the face, this sudden *incipit*? Perhaps we had better ask ourselves how it is that it has not lost its glamour. Incidentally, *glamour* is related with *grammar*, with which it shares the aura of magic. Why is it that its grip has now waned, when the chances would have been that it wear off its incantatory clothing, thin down its gnomish flesh, and dwindle into forgetfulness? Not only that. Overwritten on folk balladry, it would have normally ceased to impress, just because potentially boring, *déjà vu*, too much with us. Tradition, like the world, is “too much with us”. As is modernity.

That, too, has long grown into a term of abuse. What *is* modernity? Where does it start? Where does it come to an end? And has it? Is its *post*-phase of the same substance as the root *mod*-, calling to mind the famous Petronian *modo, modo*, that proof of classic impatience, the latterly span of a long-spun yarn, the same fabric, merely with a better, or worse, choice of threads? Or is it new cloth woven in a new loom, *and* in an incomparably more sophisticated one, say a computer? Postmodern Penelopes appear more versatile than any predecessor. Equipped with technology able to put the Parcae to shame, they are readier than Clio to marry the warp and weft of histories, *and* offer them as “history”. They can do and undo, add and delete, cut and paste (“scissor and paste” sounds the Collingwoodian syntagm) to the extent of braiding, enmeshing, and intertwining into shape an ever-changing canvas.

The tissue, then, *texture, text* of modernity? A make-believe extending from Aristotle’s to Baudrillard’s *simulacra*? In the last half century the literature has consistently brought to the

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fore the “long story” topos: the Leavisite *Great Tradition* aiming to mend, but in effect more prone to end, what now is “the” long tradition of English fiction, with a wealth of “nice work” making the more prominent the pattern in the carpet; the “long history” narrative with one footing in Herodotean relation and the other in alternative anthropologies; the “long twentieth century” fraught with world war traumas boiling over into the twenty-first set of a hundred years, there, on our television screens as daily *pharmakon*; the “long eighteenth century”, itself confected in America for European use; the “long Renaissance” with its appended “new baroque”; the “long Middle Ages” and its critical pendant “New Medievalism”; subsuming all, the “long modernity”, from Charlemagne to George W. Bush; subsuming that, the New Historicism, that passionate desire “to speak with the dead” recently overwritten by Stephen Greenblatt as Mobility Studies, in which the “long tradition” is seen at work, in space and time – chronotopically – as ample cultural negotiations, “the” proof of modernity.

With this plethora of “*long ages*” or “*long periods*” we can do a myriad things, from the *longue durée* of Braudelian Mediterraneanism to Habermasian ponderings on the unfinished project. Where Krzysztof Pomian speaks of “l’histoire des structures” or else “l’histoire [qui] commence ainsi à établir des liens avec la biologie” [17, 131], we discern “les grandes *chronosophies* [qui] prétendent dire le passé, le présent et l’avenir de l’Humanité” [20, 9]. Alternately, the *historical movement* originating in *historical consciousness* bears testimony to the “unquestioned modern sense of time” [1, 8]. Supplanting the “classic” idea that historicism is a 19th-century invention, the “long historical movement” theory traces its line from the cynical Florentine – the Machiavel, or Machiavillain –, via the “republican” Bodin, on to the inductive analyst Bacon, the utilitarian Hobbes, and the empiricist Locke, to find its bird’s-eye view of history in the Neapolitan’s *verum factum* story. We find it in Charles Darwin’s evolutionism building on Romantic historicism, which, in its turn, stems from Leibniz’s meliorism and principle of plenitude, whose last, i.e. first, source within written memory, is Plato’s “chain of being”. This Lovejovian panoply of history of ideas makes out another case for our query: where does the history of ideas *qua* discipline originate? In 20th-century theories of –ism’s (the Whiteheadian type²), in 19th-century searches for the “*eternal Moi*” (the Victor Cousin type³), in 18th-century ambitions to draw up a comprehensive map of human knowledge (the Vico – Brucker type⁴), or in the 17th-century “climate of opinion” vehicled since with unanimous joy under anonymous cover?

In the “age of reason” philosophy narrows down its focus to the “lives and opinions” passed on in respect of various aspects of the human condition, a disposition accounting for the *new genre* called the *novel* – an unrestrainedly *modern gesture*. It is the time when the history of ideas finds its local habitation and its name. A look back, with poise, rather than in anger, will leave at least one extra door open: Darwin, indeed, is the English tag attached to the *modern merchandise* called *evolutionism*, but not Charles. In the modern year 1789, when Blake links his *Songs of Innocence* to the murder of innocence across the Channel, Erasmus, Charles’ grandfather, proudly pens poems dipping his quill into Linnaean ink. The result is neoclassic verse in the manner of Pope dealing with binary plant taxonomy. His grandson was to take up this unfinished project of modernity and apply it to primates, before deconstructionists ever came to lament the never innocent pairs of opposites, standing on tiptoe on Troubetzkoy’s “*binaires chargées*”. The blow dealt at the Biblical story of Adamic creation reads back into the

² Alfred North Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* appears in 1925 as a first brace-up of his lifelong attempts to harmonize knowledge and reason – the ‘modern’ way – with mysticism and religion – the ‘classic’ way to truth. A decade later, Paul Hazard sends to the print his *Crise de la conscience européenne*. Of the same substance, albeit of thirty odd years later, Le Spitzer’s *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: An Interpretation of the Word “Stimmung”* launches between John Hollander’s *The Untuning of the Sky* (1961) and Pythagorean numerology a bridge with banisters supported by pillars erected by such idea-fans as Plato, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, Gregory the Great, Dante, Scotus Erigena, Isidor of Seville, St. Thomas of Aquinas, Petrarch, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Giordano Bruno, John Donne, Alberti, Dryden and Pope.

³ Donald R. Kelley in [15] refers to Cousin’s *Manuel de l’histoire de la philosophie de Tennemann* in which the syntagm ‘*histoire des idées*’ is coined (p. 17).

⁴ Vico’s *Scienza nuova* (1725) borrows the phrase ‘*storia delle idee*’ from J.J. Brucker’s *Historia philosophica doctrinae de ideis* (1723).

Enlightenment validation of *aude sapere*, Montaigne's doubt with regard to cannibals, or Valla's dismantling of the "donatio Constantini" passages in the "revealed word of God".

As a race of "imagined communities", we have lived *time* measured according to communal points zero: the Olympic Games, "*ab urbe condita*", the birth of Christ, 1 January 1563 (in force as of 14 April 1566 – as short a year as any simulated on the computer in postmodern times), 1 January 1582 suffering from the hangover of the Gregorian 11-day shortening – all those 1 Januaries replacing Easter Day, as well as heathen spring fertility launches, 22 December 1989, Nine Eleven 2001... As a "*décalque de réalité*" and "*image mémorielle*" [5, 20], time is a symbol of social orientation and collective configuration telling on us with the weight of cultural accumulation. It is instrumental in our "invention of tradition", to use Hobsbawmian vocabulary, in those sets of practices inculcating values and norms that *fictionalize* the past, as they do the present and the future, to produce such securing narratives as: a suitable historic past, the sanction of precedent, natural law and social appropriateness, monuments, rituals and ceremonies doing justice to Pierre Nora's "*lieux de mémoire*", theatrical discourse, founding myths, liturgical re-enactments.

As a signiferous race, we are very good at rewriting-overwriting the graphs of previous alphabets: the creation of the Christian landscape is a complex labour of "conversion of the physical world" [14, 63], *mirabilia* establish their *sui generis* rearrangements of time and space, with the "*divisament*" of the world at once alarming and appeasing – the case of Marco Polo's defiance of received ideas [see 19], global modernity carries on persistent operations of "colonization of consciousness" and "cultural imperialism", not unlike the Christian missionaryism of yore, if with hugely more efficient tools [4, 3-1-325]. Bestowing upon them a distinct way of behaving is *memory*, whose relation to history is that of liturgical to historical time – the latter made up of unique and mostly anodyne moments, with occasional arresting events, the former reiteratable, representable, retrievable. "Memory (...), so pervasive in academic circles today (...) in an attempt to recuperate presence in history (...), has displaced deconstruction as the *lingua franca* of cultural studies" [22, 149].

And so our "long modernity". The "long eighteenth century" takes pride of place among a set of "*longues durées*". Preeminently a didactic catchphrase in American readers and anthologies, it generously extends across three centuries, from 1660 (when the theatre of royalty and *the* theatre are restored, with concomitant comic outbursts) to 1820 (when a lunatic monarch leaves the British throne, and this world, to make room for Regency and reform times). Between these landmarks of identity reshaping, the "long eighteenth century" stabilizes the *narrative of modernity* as cultural institutions, practices, insignia, protocols, values and symbols. It witnesses the "emergence of the public sphere" [10, 81], the legitimation of conversation as favourite Johnsonian "*clubbability*", the establishment of the novel as the one genre to be consumed in privacy, held in one's arms before one's head droops with exhaustion at the end of a day's activity, thrust under one's nose on one's breakfast tray or one's toilet table, shuffled down the deep cut of a rustling taffeta dress, thrown under one's bed, devoured in silent masturbation. As "the" century of enlightened rationality, the "long eighteenth century" consolidates the pragmatic, utilitarian avenue to knowledge, which it sanctions and anchors in the reality "out" there, where it had previously been safeguarded by hooks "up" there, standardizes public formalities, regularizes individual and collective rights and obligations, and turns its back on mystic fright, uncertainty, and hesitation. Onto the stage of history steps yet another myth called *progress*. Reputedly grinned over by Horkheimer and Adorno [see 13], it is seen with no less critical an eye by Carl Becker: "The *Philosophes* demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine only to rebuild it with more up-to-date materials" [2, 31]. The clever punning applied to the British 18th century as more Augustinian than Augustan [see 9] is thus less ensconced in rhetoric than may appear at first sight.

A number of recent Shakespearean studies have promoted the "long modernity" thesis in some fashion or another. Gay Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from*

the Restoration to the Present looks at the life of this insignium of identity from the incipit of the British “long eighteenth century” to our East European “long 1989” [see 24]. It suggests an exciting conclusion: that Britishness itself be measured by this paragon of modernity called Shakespeare. The stance is not dissimilar to Harold Bloom’s, in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, in which, coextensive with the *modern age*, the great Will does the business attributed by Foucault to the *modern episteme*. Hugh Grady maintains that “our Shakespeare, until quite recently, has been very much a Modernist Shakespeare” [6, 2] propagated in the English-speaking world by Wilson Knight and E.M.W. Tillyard. To offer the *temporal* switch to this outmoded tableau, Grady proposes a Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* reading. It is a bright manoeuvre, with the Angel of History discreetly fleeting by. As in Klee’s painting, where he flies forward, yet is kept motionless by leaden soles, in Grady’s imagined tableau Shakespeare pushes on into postmodern readings – whether deconstructive, postcolonial, feminist, new historicist or, more widely, culturalist – while he is pulled back into 19th-century “bureaucratic” criticism, Romantic organicist and pathetic tirades, and Enlightenment rule-abiding decorum.

Elsewhere, Grady is categorical, as in a volume edited under the title *Shakespeare and Modernity* [see 7]. His demonstration is worth analytical acumen: in four hundred years, the archive of writing about Shakespeare has repeatedly used the word “*modern*”, a term only briefly devaluated in the mid-20th century. As a “qualitatively new kind of anti-traditional society which arose in the West” [7, 2], modernity is fed by Hegel’s philosophical system to eventually migrate into Marxism. It would be harder to tell when it originates: in the Enlightenment?, in the Renaissance?, in the Middle Ages? For one thing, Hegel sees Shakespeare as an “enunciator of modernity” [8, 21], mainly owing to his individualized characters and emphasis on subjectivity – the Burckhardtian thesis, in principle. Inasmuch as the Renaissance is *this*, and inasmuch as modernity is *this*, Shakespeare is *the Renaissance*, and he is *modernity*. But the historian’s, like the critic’s, eye is always marked by inevitable “*presentism*” (a fair mix of proleptic and analeptic views), and therefore those ingredients that we identify in our *classic modernity*, like capitalism, instrumental reason, Machiavellian power and autonomous subjectivity are basic issues of the discourse of modernity and of Shakespeare studies.

In *Shakespeare and Machiavelli*, John Roe starts from the accredited “modern” valorization of the Renaissance as an age which “re-read, re-invigorated, and, to some extent, redefined those authors whom it recovered” [21, ix]. This propensity he finds at work both in Machiavelli and in Shakespeare, a subtle “*conversation with the dead*”, as in Greenblatt’s epoch-making *Shakespearean Negotiations*. He is joined by Grady, again, whose overtly declared “*presentist studies*” brings in, via the *mentalité* perspective, the recontextualisation of the past as an “interpretive translation”, at once “an implicit allegory of the present” and a “configuration of the past” [8, 2]. Montaignean subjectivity, like “Machiavillain” *Realpolitik*, unavoidable in our daily life now, transforms Adorno’s negative dialectics into an older attitude than the Enlightenment. The late 20th century reads back into the Renaissance, as the latter grows into the 18th century. A yet “*longer long eighteenth century*” stands in front of us, one in which “the touch of the real” [16, vii] leaves its traces on “*humanisms, old and new*” [17, 84], socially-embedded offices, fashion, idleness and property as typically modern realities.

Modern valorizations of the Middle Ages have evinced central contributions to our modern identity: the university, no less than the castle, the cathedral, no less than the market place, the aristocrat with educational ambitions, no less than the devoted warrior, are all medieval inventions. They are taken for granted now and hardly anybody could deny their constitutive role in the making of our modernity. “It is an ancient Mariner”, indeed, whose business is that of a killjoy only to make us aware of the complicating factors of our modern identity. His ship comes down to us all the way from Eric the Red, engaged in discovering America *before* the discovery of America, from Christophorus Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Gulliver and Psalmanazar, the Titanic and the Columbia. What were they all after, if not

encountering their missing half, according to the ancient Greek *symbolon*. In our late *and* liquid modernity, we navigate with Vattimo and Bauman on the Internet. Our canvas is as rough as old caravel sails, and as fluid as the quartz screen image. It is a *sui generis* navigation *and* weaving, navigation *as* weaving. Our text now is Ulyssean and Penelopian, nomadic and settled, actual and virtual. Our sailing across wide spaces involves more flotsam, more jetsam, and certainly more lagan than ever before. For late modernity is the longest of long modernities.

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Modernitatea lungă: Valorizarea timpului și a memoriei de la modernitatea timpurie la modernitatea târzie

Rezumat

Lucrarea de față propune conceptul de “long modernity” (modernitatea lungă) în discursul despre modernitate ca termen subînținzând frecvent întâlnitele “early modernity” (modernitatea timpurie) sau “late modernity” (modernitatea târzie). Între aceste două extreme, sunt inevitabili sau necesari termeni precum “classic modernity” (modernitatea clasică), cunoscut și drept Iluminism-Romantism și “high modernity” (modernitatea matură), cunoscut și ca victorianism. Ocupându-se de text(ura) modernității celei lungi, demonstrația gravitează în jurul unor momente cruciale ale procesului modernității, de la finele Evului Mediu până în zilele noastre, insistând asupra instituțiilor “inventate” de fiecare fază, de la universitate și piață la roman, sfera publică, calea ferată și avion, la mijloacele IT, adică de la textele fizice la textele virtuale, toate răspunzătoare de identitatea noastră modernă.