Homer, Medieval or Modern?
The Battle for the Literary Canon

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In 1856 Hippolyte Rigault's *Histoire de la Querelle* launched the formula "la querelle des anciens et des modernes", a convenient syntagm in still current use. Originating in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, against "la crise de la conscience européenne" (Hazard 1935), the famous dispute became a phenomenon with far-reaching consequences, among which the settlement of the modern literary canon in eighteenth-century Europe. In principle, the snowballing conflict already encapsulated the tradition – invention dichotomy by contrasting unconditional veneration of the precursors with the teleological optimism of 'classic modernity', by which I designate the Enlightenment.

Put differently, it was a re-enactment of a foundational topos once ushered into our, indeed, European conscience, by Bernard de Chartres, the topos of 'dwarves on the shoulders of giants': the ancients are giants serving as pillars, the moderns are truly endowed with a comprehensive vision owing to the altitude they have gained from tradition, but, more emphatically, as the result of the responsibility assumed by such a stance (Merton 1985). Two archetypal visions meet in this, the one, past-bound, raising its hat to received values, the other, present- and future-oriented, validating the programme of the 'long modernity' of which we are but the late phase.

With spectacular effects in the late seventeenth – early eighteenth century intellectual circles in France and England, the 'querelle' stemmed from the dismantling of the classic 'grand theory' of objective perfection (Tatarkiewicz 1974). In Foucauldian terms, it corresponds to the passage from the classic to the modern episteme, from, that is to say, the theory of representation as the general background of all possible order, to the profound historicity lying at the heart of things. It points to how is superseded the classic view of similitude and equivalence, rooted in the 'same', by modern thinking, for which difference is the paragon and

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the guarantor of identity, both for the 'same' and the 'other'. Which is also a way of defining that 'recent invention' – man (Foucault 1966).

The memorable 'querelle' is coextensive with the birth of 'modern thought as such' (Patey 1997) owing to the subsequent separation of the arts from the sciences and the concurrent assertion of the doctrine of progress in knowledge. A part of the latter, human progress is associated with the concepts of 'age' and 'period', the promotion of taste as paragon of beauty, and, in the last instance, the institutionalization of literature in the sense in which we use the term nowadays. It stands at the head of the new discipline called aesthetics and of that other one called literary criticism, as independent intellectual endeavours. In broad lines, the victory of the moderns means debunking the universal authority of the ancients and the assertion of local specificity, supplanting the classical languages by the vernaculars, understanding the world through the prism of historical relativism and accepting the plurality of identities – all cultural baggage that had lain dormant, under pain if death, between the classic antiquity and the Renaissance.

A sustained debate extended over the last quarter of the seventeenth century in Paris, with an equivalent across the Channel. Both resulted in the inceptive eighteenth century in the "querelle d'Homère". It is one of few moments of Franco-English harmony. More interestingly yet, it became a European debate within years of its burgeoning. The main actors on the French scene were Perrault and Fontenelle, to defend the moderns, against Boileau's position in his *Art poétique* of 1674. Enamoured of tales from, and of, 'times past', Charles Perrault defied the classical taste by searching for answers to the great questions of life in none but French folklore, an attitude perceived as downright arrogant defiance. In *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes* (1688–1696), he theorized on the theme of time as the parent of politeness, taste and natural knowledge *and* defended France against 'rebels who prefer ancient works to their own'. Venerability, in other words, was never to be scoffed, yet the fresh spirit was to be welcomed for the sake of the living present. Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, in his turn, imagined a series of *Dialogues des morts*, in which the ancients were deplored as losing ground to the moderns because of their incurable bent for fixities and conceptual errors. People should know, the moral sounded, that the works of humans are made by humans. As they should know that the wisdom of the dead grows more potent yet in the wisdom of the living. So, as Perrault raised modern verse above ancient rhyme, Fontenelle acclaimed the novel and fairy tales as new genres/species to be cultivated and enjoyed in the French vernacular by a wide readership. Out went the chronicles of old, in stepped the new, vivacious spirit. Enough, also, of dusted moral lessons, the time was ripe for enjoyment. Of the received *utile dulci* precept more, it was felt, could be preserved of the latter than of the former component, and that, for the sake of taste!

The dispute bore the name of "the Battle of the Books" in England, in the track of Jonathan Swift's essay of the same title produced in 1704. Stirred by the lines laid down in 1690 by Sir William Temple under the title *Some Thoughts upon receiving the Essay of Ancient and Modern Learning*, the conservative Swift orchestrated a dramatic skirmish in a library, a space that we could imagine as a classic modern substitute to the celebrated Alexandria library. The moderns voice a

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peremptory claim that the ancients leave the higher peak of the Parnassus on which they have lived at ease. Never before questioned in their capacity as eternal dwellers of the place, the classics take offence. But, as the theatre of the battle is a modern institution, the grave register is symbolically overwritten by the comic one. A spider and a bee, lodgers of the said quarters, are forced into joining the strife. Aesop steps in to decide, as in an exemplary fable, that the spider is the modern author weaving a fabric from his own entrails, while the bee is the classic feeding himself on mother nature's gifts, unwilling to be a prey to the illusion of personal performance. How alike M.H. Abrams's lamp – mirror dichotomy! Swift's insect clash degenerates or, rather, is amplified to the proportions of a serious battle involving Homer, Pindar, Aristotle and Plato against Milton, Dryden, Descartes and Hobbes under the wand of a subtle divinity called Criticism. And thus, persons and personae, or, rather, the *persona* responsible for assessments in what will be later called the aesthetic field, wage a symbolic battle with a protracted issue. The ancients come out victorious and the conflict is suspended.

The 'battle for Homer' in the France of the early-mid-seventeenth century brought to the fore Houdart de la Motte, the translator-'improver' of the poet of poets, and Mme Dacier, the ardent partisan of translating Homer in the 'primitive' and 'rough' manner of the original. Persuaded that sweetened expression entailed the 'corruption of taste', she portrayed la Motte as the reasonable salon practitioner of artificial geometry, in violent contrast with Homer's historical naturalness. In *Des Causes de la corruption du goût* (1714) Mme Dacier defended the simple and direct Homer and charged his 'embellisher' with the vice of too much logical clarity! The confrontation of the two has come down as the fight of geometry with history, of forced rationalism with natural drives.

There were two Homers: the one primitive and uncouth, the other civilized and fashionable, the one historical, the other geometrical. Here is the inception of *periodization* in literary studies, something unknown before. Together with it the naming of 'classicism' is itself the offspring of the 'querelle'. Homer became the object of two different kinds of study: on the one hand, there remained the inertia of the 'classical' view of the model bard of the venerable antiquity – a *canonical homage* all through; on the other, the 'modern' view was held according to which Homer was 'investigated historically by literary scholars' of the so-called 'historical movement' (Foerster 1947: 112). A subtle rearrangement of critical positions was entailed by this canonical quarrel for the 'true Homer'. A first grouping condensed round the concept of a 'primitive' Homer (Lovejoy, Boas 1935), inferior only to Ossian! Other 'primitive' cultures gained critical attention, for instance Celtic and Scandinavian materials were conflated into a single 'runic' tradition, and poets such as Thomas Gray wrote verse in imitation of the Icelandic and Celtic tradition – all part of the Celtic revival of the day. 'Medievalism' gained terrain as a way of being modern (sic): Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethan dramatists, considered exotic, because 'primitive', ranked 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 underlined the 'spontaneous (…) fertile imagination' that he shared with the 'frantic' Ossian (Foerster 1947: 120).

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The second category comprised critics aware of the 'modernity' of the contemporary scene, to which humanity had ascended in the course of the ages. This typically Enlightenment view of progress was expressed by Thomas Blackwell, the restorer of Greek culture in northern Scotland, an attitude in itself 'romantic' for expectations of his day! In his fairly unsystematic *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), he did his best to prove Homer's superiority on all the other poets known by humanity. Blackwell also spoke of 'the different Periods or Steps, naturally succeeding in the Progression of Manners' (Patey 1997: 65), which makes of the Homeric not simply 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' (Gorak 1997: 565).

In the eighteenth century the notion of age did not necessarily mean a hundred years. It could easily be sixty or seventy years, roughly the length of a human life. Hence also the idea of periods or stages in the life of a people or a culture. In terms of *the classical,* and of *the modern, canon*, periodization opens 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 was to be of fundamental relevance to the whole set of *debates on canonical matters* in the late century, in anticipation of the romantic manifestos. In principle, by 'classic' was understood the harmonious unity of the spirit declaimed by Winckelmann, while by 'romantic' was designated the divided and alienated modern self. A transition figure herself, Germaine de Staël embraced the historical approach in *De l'Allemagne* (1810–13), in which she saw the classic and the romantic as the result of two kinds of literature, rather than of two eras. She remains seminal in laying the foundations of a typological classic – romantic dichotomy, in spite of the historical premises of her assessment.

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', was later symbolically attached, in contrast to the 'classic' and 'republican' Milton. This became the *central canonical pair of writers* of eighteenth-century English letters. Echoes of this foundational opposition were not extinct even in the 20th century, where a Dylan Thomas claimed his literary ascendancy in the 'primitive' Celtic revival, while a T.S. Eliot looked for his roots in the classic Latinity.

Some of the most spectacular retrievals of *canonical writers* long given to undeserved oblivion were the result of the relatively heated debate on *primitivism* that went on between 1660 (the year of the Reformation) and 1800 (two years after Wordsworth's famous Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which the virtues of 'common' people were praised). Charles II's return to the throne of England coincided with a general rejection of the past, Shakespeare himself being considered ignorant of art and decorum by pedantic conservatives like Pope. One of the ways to cope with this unacceptable 'roughness' of the onetime much respected dramatist was 'improving' upon his texts. By and large, though, 'primitive' cultures were regarded as temporally part of the 'rough past', and spatially 'exotic lands', in an ensuing aesthetic category that, from our standpoint now, we will call 'the remote'.

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In the current opinion, the unkempt image of these cultures was felicitously counterbalanced by highly *metaphoric languages* spoken in their communities deemed unable to formulate difficult concepts, because unable to attain abstraction. The thesis of an originary poeticalness of expression was to become a basic component of romantic manifestos pursuing the Vicoian line of thought.

Concomitant with this delight in primitive-poetic language was a revival of interest in medieval and Gothic exoticism. Usually scorned as 'uncouth' in the Frenchified aristocratic circles of the 1700's, medieval poetry, balladry and drama gained a new vigour in the public eye owing to the growing sense of historical relativism of the mid-century. Medieval texts ceased being read with constant reference to the classical standards, which rearranged the very idea of a *canonical reference*. The opening of the British Museum in January of 1759 made available manuscripts and collections previously unknown. The most forceful impression was made by the Chaucerian texts thus restored to English memory after centuries of unfair disregard. Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser* (1754) made explicit the new attitude: Chaucer's 'old manner, his romantic arguments, his wildness of painting, his simplicity and antiquity of expression' weighed heavy in the capacity of transporting his readership 'into some fairy region', being 'all highly pleasing to the imagination' (Sabor 1997: 474). Here are all the basic ingredients of the soon acknowledged romantic appraisal of exoticism: remoteness in space and time to the extent that some unearthly reality sneaks in to replace the referential one and legitimate a realm of the fantastic governed by fairly-tale laws. The use of the term 'romantic' in the customary sense of 'uncommon, strange, unpredictable' is a clear confirmation of the changing perception of aesthetic value that will culminate in the early 1800's with acclaimed *savageness*, the utter opposite of the programmatic *poise* of the *ancient canonicals*.

The revaluation of Geoffrey Chaucer was much of a public case in which had joined prominent figures like John Dryden some one century before. In his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1665) Dryden called Chaucer 'the father of English poetry' in the context in which he later raised the hymns to Shakespeare. In both cases he anticipates the *canonical change* of the eighteenth century by opting for the *English and modern*, instead of the *French and classical*, element. An incursion into Elizabethan drama makes him halt al length to compare Ben Jonson with Shakespeare and to famously conclude that the former was rather too classical, after all, too aware of the unities and of Latinite expressions, while the latter he finds appropriate to consider 'naturally learned'. Dryden cannot, of course, rid himself of classical tradition, nor does he need to, and in his promotion of a *canon of English moderns* he does go back to the sure landmarks of *the classical antiquity*, yet his final decision can hardly be ignored: 'If I would compare (Jonson) with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit'. And, he goes on '*Shakespeare* was *the Homer*, or father of our dramatic poets: *Jonson* was *the Virgil*, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare'.

It is worthwhile mentioning that Shakespeare was recuperated in an already forming *romantic* atmosphere quite naturally associated with *medievalism* and *primitivism*. In categorical contrast with the *classical antiquity*, this was the

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background against which Gower was dug out and found elegiac, even though lacking Chaucer's imagination, and, most importantly, *Beowulf* was discussed for the first time by Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1799–1805) as 'the most interesting relic of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

It is also relevant to make the observation that these genuine samples of medieval poetry were instrumental in feeding the taste for medievalism as a state of mind *and* soul, to bring in a Blakean tinge, as well as in encouraging *the pseudo-medieval*, an aesthetic category definitely in the service of *the new forming canon of taste*. Such were James Macpherson's purported translations from the Gaelic of a certain poet Ossian, or Horace Walpole's Gothic novels. The Gothic revival in Victorian culture is but a later extension of the same phenomenon, and a proof of the call of the wild at a time of overemphasized domesticity of manners, preferences and attitude.

The battle was waged with varying amounts of weaponry and determination all through Alexander Pope's and Laurence Sterne's century. The border between two aesthetic views was assuming contour, with the modern spirit as the undeniable winner. A Copernican revolution in aesthetics occurred in the mid-century, after the proclamation of the latter's full rights by Baumgarten in 1750. Universal objective beauty was dislocated by individual subjective beauty, and rule-abiding delight made room for emotion. Beauty found 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 was to stand as a pillar against which the moderns would lean to enjoy the taste of novelty. Their victory was the victory of difference, of the 'other', whether as the sublime, the grotesque, the savage, the excessive, or the ugly. As it traversed the romantic territory, symbolism later on only naturally uttered its manifesto as an echo of the 'querelle des anciens et des modernes'.

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Abstract

Coextensive with the settlement of the modern literary canon, so with the institutionalization of literature in our acceptation of the term, the *querelle d'Homère* or *battle of the books* traversed Classic Modernity, aka 'long eighteenth century' as a reenactment of the tradition-invention dichotomy. While the prerequisites of the said conceptual *polemos* were, indeed, of traditional stock, the inflections of the clash assumed modern dimensions. On either side of the Channel what was as stake was how to set the right balance between two archetypal visions, one past-bound and showing unconditional observance of received values, rules and norms, the other future-geared, with high stakes on history and historical occurrence, on the dynamic view of culture/ literature and the conviction that progress can only be validated function of unavoidable change. Between *historical* and *geometrical* Homer, the former retrieved in his uncouth primitivism, the latter modelled on unfailingly straight and therefore correct classic lines (sic), the conceptual war was eventually won by the *romantic* taste for novelty. This entailed such phenomena as: period and periodization, a taste for remoteness whether in time or space or both, the sense of modern dividedness and difference, the sense of cultural identity along ethnogenetic – cultural geography – institutional(ized) lines etc. At the end of the day, it could be said that the famous conflict resulted in the modern sense of *identity* and/as *difference*.

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