

The Shock of the Ancient: Literature & History in Early Modern France

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Playing on the title of Robert Hughes's popular history of modernist art, *The Shock of the New* (1980), Larry Norman recreates that moment in 17th- and 18th-century France when the classical literary texts that Renaissance humanists had treated as timeless vehicles of cultural value, and so put at the core of European education, came to many to seem shockingly 'primitive,' even 'barbaric' – superseded, in effect, by the progress of polite and rational modernity. Those who professed most loudly to feel such shock, Charles Perrault and (more wryly) Bernard de Fontenelle, were the 'Moderns' in the famous *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* (as it was named in 1859 by Hyppolite Rigault) which exploded into prominence in the 1670s and 1680s and soon engulfed all Europe. To Homer, declared Perrault, 'it suffices for a general to have valor and swift feet'; his Achilles is 'unjust, brutal, pitiless, impious, and lawless' (p. 114). Homer would have been a better poet had he lived in Louis XIV's enlightened age, since 'a modern methodical writer, even of limited natural gifts, can surpass the most inspired geniuses of the past, who relied on nothing but instinct' (p. 162) (and to prove the point, Perrault published in 1686 his devotional epic *Saint Paulin*.)

Defenders of the remains of the classical past, from Boileau to the early 18th-century 'Ancients' Anne Dacier and Jean Boivin (combatants in the Battle's second phase, the so-called *Querelle d'Homère*) fought a rear-guard action in the face of ever more recalcitrant Moderns, especially the relentlessly rationalist 'geometers' Jean Terrasson and Antoine Houdar de La Motte. In 1715 Terrason explained his view of both literary composition and criticism:

The geometric approach is certainly quite as valuable as that of literary commentary ... There is no topic or matter that should escape the most rigorous examination: the art of poetry has its own axioms, its own theorems, corollaries, and demonstrations; and though its forms and terms may appear in a different guise, it is always fundamentally the same steps of reasoning, the same method, however adorned they be, that result in true proofs (p. 156).

Terrasson would call the *Iliad* the first tale to celebrate an utterly vicious hero, one 'who never once voluntarily did good for anyone' (p. 116); La Motte would publish an altered and abridged version of the poem designed 'to correct its most shocking parts' (p. 85).

The story of the battle of Ancients and Moderns has often been told, usually as the triumph of the Moderns, and usually in an effort to locate the 'big ideas' behind what might otherwise seem a rather trivial literary spat. After an initial phase in which combatants claimed either the superiority of ancient (pre-medieval) or modern (post-medieval) learning *tout court*, Modern theorists such as Fontenelle divided the prize between those disciplines which proceed by method and cumulative progress and those which reach full flower almost immediately. The first came to be called 'sciences', the second 'arts', and in the process not only our modern division of the disciplines of knowledge but also modern notions of progress were born.⁽¹⁾ At the same time, a new periodization of antiquity emerged (especially an understanding of Homer as pre-classical), and a new sense of the historicity of texts and relativity of the cultures that produced them. (The loving care with which Renaissance humanists sought to understand the most intimate details of ancient texts had already, ironically, contributed to render them foreign, the products of a world radically different from our own; Homer's Modern detractors could turn for ammunition not merely to Plato but also to Julius Caesar Scaliger's 1561 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*.) And, of course, Greek and Latin began their slow recession from the centre to the margins of the European educational curriculum.

Larry Norman touches deftly on all these big ideas while choosing instead to tell the story of the Quarrel from the inside, from the points of view (often deeply divided) of its participants. Luminously written and argued, *The Shock of the New* is the work of that too-rare being, a literary scholar who writes always to inform rather than simply to impress. He begins with mid-century proto-Moderns (Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin and Corneille) and proto-Ancients (Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre and Racine) to show that nearly all the central ideas of the Quarrel were present even before Perrault and Fontenelle entered the fray, and he ends with brief examinations of its aftermath in Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau (the last of whom, in his approval of Geneva's ban on theatrical productions, comes off as the most radical Modern of all). Though Norman treats only France – Vico makes brief appearances, but among English combatants, Jonathan Swift and William Wotton receive only fleeting mention, Sir William Temple appears not at all, and Alexander Pope comes into the story only as his translation of Homer reflects French debates; the later 18th-century German reformulation of the Quarrel is entirely elided – *The Shock of the Ancient* is nonetheless the single best, most nuanced account now available of what was at stake in the Quarrel, the one with which all students of the period (and of the origins of modernity in literature) should start. And if, as I have argued elsewhere, that strain in mid 18th-century British literature once called 'pre-romantic' – the new poetry and criticism pursued in the 1740s by Mark Akenside, William Collins, and the Wartons – owes as much to the French Quarrel as to home-grown debates, *The Shock of the Ancient* will be as important for understanding British as French literary history.⁽²⁾

In striking contrast to earlier accounts, Norman tells a story of victory by the Ancients – victory in the area that mattered most to them, ancient poetry, which was from the start the real nerve of the Quarrel. (Today we would say 'literature' rather than 'poetry,' but in the 1670s, our modern sense of 'literature' was still a century away; its emergence in the later 18th century was, Norman suggests, one of the most important long-term effects of the Quarrel.) In one of this book's most original and informative moves, Norman finds the commitments and motives of all the Quarrel's combatants to be deeply divided. Even the most devout Ancients, he explains, relished modern progress in the sciences, religion, and social life, so that 'there are Ancient and Modern positions to be found in writings, but not pure and simple Ancients and Moderns

among actual writers' (p. 49): nobody really wished to return to a Homeric world in which gentlefolk cooked their own supper and did their own laundry. All sides agreed on the improvement of natural knowledge, especially since Bacon and (especially) Descartes. Though he believed (as he told his friend Jean-Baptiste Rousseau) that 'the philosophy of Descartes had cut poetry's throat' (p. 157), the arch-Ancient Boileau could associate Ronsard's classical borrowing with pedantry, and the advances made by his hero Malherbe with Cartesian 'method' (so much so that the poet André Chenier could later accuse Boileau – of all people! – of being too much a Modern). But still the Ancients wished to celebrate early poets such as Homer; how now to do so?

The Ancients' predicament was made especially difficult by the demands that their Modern opponents placed on poetry. Everyone accepted the Horatian maxim that poetry must balance the *utile* and *dulce*, but Modern critics pushed harder on the first than ever before. First of all, Norman explains, poetry was to meet the same standards as any other kind of discourse:

For Desmarets – as for many of the Modern apologists to follow – the choice is clear: either literary works are important and reveal truth, in which case they must meet intense philosophical, ideological, and theological scrutiny, or they are simply frivolous pastimes of no intellectual or political value. As an ambitious epic poet, Desmarets of course clings to the first opinion – to the revelatory nature of literature – and thus suggests that poetry be submitted to the same expectations and constraints that rule in other domains of knowledge. There is no poetic exception in regard to truth. The moderns alone have it; the ancients, only false 'fiction' (p. 102).

Second, poetry was to teach especially by embodying standards of decorum of the sort neoclassical critics thought they found prescribed in Aristotle's *Poetics*: kings must be kingly, heroes heroic (or, in negative examples, transparently the opposite). Horace's *utile* became a didacticism that turned fictions into dramatized conduct-books. On both counts, ancient poetry came up short: Homer might once have been 'the teacher of Greece', but he could hardly play the same role in modern France. Nor – for reasons Norman can only sketch (their full explanation would require a book in itself) – was allegory, that favorite Renaissance device for recuperating and even Christianizing the ancients, any longer a plausible interpretive option.

It was all very bracing to revel, with Madame Dacier, in the otherness of the Homeric past – to pronounce brashly, as she did in her 1711 preface to the *Iliad*, 'As for me ... I find those ancient times all the more beautiful in that they so little resemble our own' (p. 1). She tried gamely to argue that Homer's gods, even at their seemingly most immoral, still embodied a 'noble simplicity' (p. 144) that could be a model for our age of luxury and artifice. But if ancient works were still to command respect, a more fully reasoned defense of the shocking ancient was called for. Here the Ancients pursued two routes, both of which entailed new thinking about the nature and purposes of poetry.

The first, audible as early as Racine's defense of the un-*galant*, even perverse behavior of the characters in his tragedy *Andromaque* (1667), was to deny the didactic demands of decorum in favor of an incipient historicism and relativism of taste. For Dacier, 'The aim of poetry is to imitate, and its imitation can be [as] vicious in regard to good politics, as it is excellent in regard to good poetry'; according to Jan Boivin's *Apologie d'Homère* (1715), 'It is not a matter of determining whether the manners and morals that Homer depicts are good or bad, but simply of determining whether in his time, or in the time of the Trojan war, the manners and morals were as he depicted them' (pp. 131, 210). Armed with such an argument, Ancients could accuse their opponents of mere vanity and *amour-propre*: of simply preferring the mores of their own times, based on a mistaken equation of the standards of modern France with the deliverances of universal reason. This historicist argument would lead in the second half of the 18th century to important new thinking about cultural difference; at the time of the Quarrel, though, it failed to meet the most serious Modern rejections of the shocking ancient: it failed to explain what the value of ancient poetry might be in a modern context (beyond providing footnotes to history). Some more positive defense of ancient poetry was

necessary.

This positive defense, and with it the Ancients' victory, Norman provocatively but persuasively argues, entailed denying the continuity of poetry with other forms of discourse and erecting instead a distinct category with its own aims and standards: the category that would come to be called 'literature' and the realm of the 'aesthetic' (a new branch of philosophy, first named by Alexander Baumgarten in 1735, that would treat the sensory and imaginative apart from the understanding). Norman does not trace the consolidation of this new category in detail, but suggests that one of its most important early architects was none other than that supposedly slavish adherent of ancient rules: Boileau. In 1674, Boileau translated Longinus' *Peri Hupsous* (*On the Sublime*) into French, transforming what had previously been understood simply as a local rhetorical effect into something much larger: an unanalyzable, non-rational quality of poetry (which therefore cannot be comprehended by critical rules) that overpowers the imagination and can be experienced only in individual responses of taste. 'Method' could produce serviceable prose, but not 'le beau désordre' of the sublime.⁽³⁾

The new category of the sublime would of course become central to 18th-century aesthetics (one need think only of John Dennis, Edmund Burke, and Kant); so important was it to the Ancient cause that just as the Moderns could be depreciated as 'geometers', the Ancients were dubbed the 'Cabale du Sublime'. To Fénelon, the admitted primitivism of Homer's age rendered his sublimity all the more impressive: 'The more [Greek] religion was monstrous and ridiculous, the more one must admire [Homer] for having raised it up with so many magnificent images'; 'I do not say such customs are good', Diderot would agree in 1758, 'only that they are poetic' (pp. 211, 221). Indeed, it began to appear that only a primitive age such as Homer's could produce such powerful poetry. 'Boileau, Racine, and Fénelon all believed in the continuing potential of the sublime to erupt from modern works', but it soon became a critical commonplace that, in Diderot's formulation, 'In general, the more a people are civilized and polite, the less their manners and morals are poetical'; as first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* could state bluntly in 1768, 'poetry has been cultivated with most success in the earliest stages of society'.⁽⁴⁾

Norman is surely right to stress the role of the Quarrel, and especially of the Ancients, in helping to establish new notions of the 'literary' and the 'aesthetic'. But he does not explore the huge cost of the Ancient 'victory': the way that the transformation of poetry into a distinct, autonomous, 'literary' realm resulted in exactly the trivialization of literature that the Ancients had feared. That the best poetry should emerge from the childhood of cultures and of the race simply confirmed what from the start had been the Modern complaint that ancient poetry (indeed all poetry) is childish. In an essay 'Sur la poésie en générale,' Fontenelle explained what space was left for poetry in an advanced civilization: 'When men must conduct themselves with seriousness and weight, reason must be obeyed, and one does not indulge frivolity; but when they can behave like children, reason itself can happily play along with them' (p. 173).

As Norman says, 'the Ancients construct an aesthetics that privileges the emotional impact of the work above its didactic message' (p. 208). In other words: for all that Boileau and his followers could celebrate the power of the sublime, given the way the concept was constructed, they could not explain what it was good for beyond engaging our feelings. The same problem would beset the new category of the aesthetic, and in both cases, that failure in effect ceded to the Moderns their deepest criticism of ancient poetry: such poetry might move us, but no longer has any intellectual or social function. As the Abbé Du Bos ruefully admitted in what Norman calls 'his 1719 founding text of modern French aesthetics' (p. 219), *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 'Today only professionals make a study of the poets. After leaving school one reads them only to pass the time agreeably — not as one reads historians or philosophers, that is, to learn'.⁽⁵⁾ With the new, aesthetic theory of art pioneered by the Ancients, in other words, we are well on our way to Hegel's famous pronouncement in his *Aesthetic* (1830) that art 'no longer serves our highest need' — a sentiment that is really no more than a delicate reframing of what the Moderns had claimed from the first. Rhetoric may once have had a political function, Fontenelle had proclaimed in his 'Digression sur les anciens et les modernes' (1688), but 'Poetry ... was good for nothing, as it has always been under all kinds of regimes; that failing is of the essence of poetry'; as the Abbé de Pons argued against Madame

Dacier, 'L'Art de vers est un art frivole'.⁽⁶⁾ No wonder that, because of the 'victory' of the Ancients in the famous Quarrel, defenses of poetry become by 1800 both more pressing and more shrill than they had been before the Quarrel began: Larry Norman does not draw this last, grim moral from his story, but he provides readers all they need to do so for themselves.

Notes

1. On the redefinition of the terms 'art' and 'science,' see Patey, 'Ancients and moderns', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, IV (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 34–46. Whereas for centuries 'method' had attached to the (rule-governed) 'arts', not to 'science', in the 17th century a new notion of 'scientific method' emerges (a phrase which previously would have made no sense). The role of the Quarrel in fostering new notions of intellectual and cultural progress was recognized as early as Auguste Javary's *De l'idée du progrès* (1851) and Jules Dalavaille's *Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée du progrès jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (1910).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Patey, "'Aesthetics" and the rise of lyric in the eighteenth century', *Studies in English Literature*, 33, 3 (Summer 1993), 587–608.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Boileau introduced the phrase *beau désordre* in his *Art poétique* (1674) in discussing not Homer but the ode. If *The Shock of the Ancient* has any fault, it is that in stressing the genres of epic and (to a lesser extent) tragedy, Norman neglects the role in the Quarrel of what was usually thought the oldest and 'most poetical' kind of poetry: lyric.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Norman, pp. 223, 222; *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Edinburgh, 1768), s.v. 'Ossian'.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. 7th ed., I (Paris, 1770), , p. 303.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Hegel, *Werke*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, XIII (Frankfurt, 1970–1), p. 24; Fontenelle, trans. John Hughes, in Scott Elledge, *The Continental Model* (Ithaca, NY, 1970), p. 364; Jean-François de Pons, *Dissertation sur le poème épique, contre la doctrine de M.D.*, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1738), p. 143.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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