

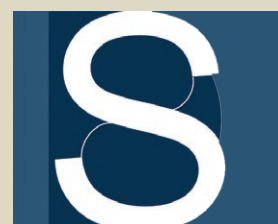
DICIOTTESIMO SECOLO

Rivista della Società Italiana di Studi sul Secolo XVIII



FI
FIRENZE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Special Issue
2025
ISSN 2531-4165



«Diciottesimo secolo» is the official international open access journal of the Società Italiana di Studi sul Secolo XVIII (SISSD). It is committed to hosting critical debates covering a full range of eighteenth century subjects: from literature to history, from law to religion, from philosophy to science, from anthropology to the fine arts, from linguistics to ethics, from theatre to music. It is also intended as an instrument for providing updated information about current Italian research in eighteenth-century studies. Published annually and double blind peer reviewed, the journal is divided into three sections: “Essays”, “Critical Notes” and “Reviews”.

Editors-in-Chief

Andrea Gatti, Università di Bologna, Italy
Rolando Minuti, Università di Firenze, Italy

Editorial Board

Alessia Castagnino, Università di Firenze, Italy
Massimo Galtarossa, Università di Padova, Italy
Giovanni Iamartino, Università di Milano, Italy
Corrado Viola, Università di Verona, Italy

Scientific Committee

Beatrice Alfonzetti, Lodovica Braidà, Gabriella Catalano, Paolo Coen, Giuseppina D’Antuono, Patrizia Delpiano, Marina Formica, Valentina Gallo, Niccolò Guasti, Rosamaria Loretelli, Chiara Lucrezio Monticelli, Emma Maglio, Rolando Minuti, Laura Nicolì, Daniele Niedda, Pasquale Palmieri, Paolo Quintili, Anna Maria Rao, Danilo Siragusa, Silvia Tatti, Duccio Tongiorgi, Lucio Tufano, Piermario Vescovo

International Scientific Committee

Jesus Astigarraga (Universidad de Zaragoza)
Penelope Corfield (Royal Holloway, University of London)
Iwan-Michelangelo D’Aprile (University of Potsdam)
Vincent Denis (Université de Paris 1)
Clorinda Donato (California State University, Long Beach)
Andrea Fabiano (Université Paris-Sorbonne)
Daniel Fulda (University of Halle)
Brigitte Marin (École française de Rome)
Rebecca Messbarger (Washington University, St. Louis)
Vincent Milliot (Université de Caen)
Sayaka Oki (University of Tokyo)
Nadia Plavinskaia (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)
Catriona Seth (All Souls College, Oxford)
Ann Thomson (European University Institute, Firenze)

Editorial Secretarial Staff

Valentina Altopiedi, Lucia Berti (Linguistic Reviewer - English), Giacomo Carmagnini, Giuseppina D’Antuono, Gianni de Nittis, Massimo Galtarossa (Managing Editor), Laura Nicolì, Cinzia Recca, Debora Sicco, Danilo Siragusa (Section Editor, “Notes and Discussions”), Valeria Tavazzi

Journal Contact: Rolando Minuti, E-mail: rolando.minuti@unifi.it; Andrea Gatti, E-mail: andrea.gatti3@unibo.it

DICIOTTESIMO SECOLO

Rivista della Società Italiana di Studi sul Secolo XVIII

Special Issue
2025

Firenze University Press

Diciottesimo secolo

<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/ds>

ISSN 2531-4165 (online)

Direttore Responsabile: **Rolando Minuti**

Supplemento al Vol. 10 (2025)



© 2025 Author(s)

Content license: except where otherwise noted, the present work is released under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>). This license allows you to share any part of the work by any means and format, modify it for any purpose, including commercial, as long as appropriate credit is given to the author, any changes made to the work are indicated and a URL link is provided to the license.

Metadata license: all the metadata are released under the Public Domain Dedication license (CC0 1.0 Universal: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/legalcode>).

Published by Firenze University Press

Firenze University Press

Università degli Studi di Firenze

via Cittadella, 7, 50144 Firenze, Italy

www.fupress.com

Introduction

From 3 to 7 July, the Italian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies had the pleasure of hosting the 16th World Conference of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ISECS - SIEDS) at the Sapienza and Tor Vergata Universities in Rome. The chosen theme, *Antiquity and the shaping of the future in the Age of Enlightenment*, proved to be of particular interest for the study of the eighteenth century, an age that saw the imposition of such an interpretation of the past as to significantly transform the dominant perspective up to that time.

In itself, the idea of reflecting on the relationship with tradition was nothing new. We all know that the comparison with antiquity has always been a constant leitmotif: no civilisation could ever think of itself in isolation from its past, from which it generally inherits themes, images and figures, thus triggering those dynamics which, implicitly or explicitly, come to question its present and its future. It is in the fragile balance between continuity and discontinuity that traditions and, at the same time, innovative tensions are projected into the future. If the discourse on classicism brings to mind the controversial relationship that the West has established with the Greco-Roman world, we cannot ignore the fact that other great civilisations – the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indians – have also repeatedly drawn on the latter, borrowing forms, meanings and values from it in one way or another. For, on closer inspection, it is history itself that feeds on contamination, on confrontation with *otherness*, both temporal and spatial.

However, in terms of the way and the intensity with which men and women looked to antiquity, it is the eighteenth century that we must look to in order to study the characteristics of what was configured as an entirely exceptional observatory. An epoch of discoveries and new knowledge, of innovations and revolutions, the age of the Enlightenment – and of the Anti-Enlightenment – was in fact characterised by the marked originality with which it knew how to construct its shared memory; it was then that, on the basis of a chronologically distant past, tastes and values, ideals and planning were reworked with highly innovative features and languages.

The political history of the eighteenth century provides effective examples of relationships that were, however, not unrelated to traits of ambivalence played out in ambiguous processes of acceptance and, at the same time, rejection. In the course of the great events that marked the eighteenth century (the dynastic crises and struggles, the American and French Revolutions, the various republican experiences, the Napoleonic era), reference to the institutional, legal and philosophical models of the Greek and Roman worlds was a constant source of inspiration. Art, literature, theatre and music have always sought and succeeded in developing innovative languages in relation to the themes and forms of expression of classical antiquity. While archaeology, museology, the science of the book and scholarship grew out of the need to know and classify the classical world in its various forms, rethinking the relationship with the knowledge codified by tradition, the sciences and techniques renewed the body of established knowledge with courage and determination. The 18th century redefined the cultural foundations of the Renaissance, transcending the traditional opposition between “ancients” and “moderns” and considering the actual condition and realization of existence. The subsequent epochs, characterised by a dynamic interplay of recognition, both of debts owed to History and of the ruptures that engender original patterns of thought and unprecedented forms of expression, became epigones, exhibiting periods of both fidelity and creativity.

On the basis of these considerations, ISECS-SIEDS wished to delve into the deeper meaning and significance of these transformations and their variables, analysing them according to the wide variety of interpretive perspectives and methodological approaches that have always animated the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Hence the idea of dedicating the quadrennial World Congresses to this theme.

As is well known, it is often the case that the scientific option is separate from the logistical one. But in our case, in an inextricable web of cross-references and mutual references, the two components immediately

merged when, naturally, Rome was chosen as the venue for the congress work.

If the Urbe was an indispensable destination on the eighteenth-century Grand Tour, it was precisely because it was the absolute capital of antiquity. For artists and men of letters, travellers and women travellers, a stay in what was then the city of the Pope was the best viaticum to acquire the key to a more general understanding of history, both individual and social; a perspective from which every project for building the future could draw nourishment and lifeblood. Because without direct, intimate, deep, total contact with what was still the *caput mundi*, any experience would have been mutilated, devoid of meaning.

The extent to which the call, addressed to the scholars of the eighteenth century, was intended, almost ideally, to evoke the projects of those who, three hundred years earlier, had already prepared grandiose achievements (the Capitoline Museum, 1734; the Pius-Clementine Museum, 1771), precisely in order to attract scholars from all over the world, could be a suggestive hypothesis to which the author deliberately does not wish to give an answer.

What is certain, however, is that the ISECS-SISSD call has met with a tremendous response from historians and philosophers, historians of art and architecture, historians of science and literature, jurists and musicologists from all parts of the world.

As active as it was intense (more than a thousand speakers took part), the participation of researchers from the five continents in the work of the conference forced the organizers to set up some 250 panels in which the question of antiquity and its various declensions were dissected from different angles. At the end of the work, the results seemed exciting for the quality as well as the quantity of pointed questions about patterns, about the internal links between Greek and Roman culture, about the channels of mediation through which events, myths and figures of the past circulated, suggesting diversified and ideologically oriented reading hypotheses that now activate forms of sociability, formal and informal, centred precisely on the revival of the classics.

What were the effects of this presence in the creation of academies, in the development of new pedagogies, even in the articulation of itineraries? And what was the impact of this rebirth of the ancient at the level of the market, of professions, of companies? Again, was it really a rebirth – of interests, of passions – or was it not rather the re-proposal of motifs and stylistic features that had never been dormant, onto which original, obsolete languages and contents were grafted?

In the light of the hypotheses formulated, the questions about the definition of “neoclassical” have been

cloaked with new questions and meanings. The papers presented at the conference clearly demonstrated how themes and problems of an aesthetic nature can transcend the boundaries of art history and literature to invest the social sciences themselves. Many speakers presented original interpretative hypotheses that linked the recovery of classical forms and the rational foundations of beauty to a need for perfection that ultimately activated projections of political value. The most striking case, that of the French Revolution, is certainly not the only one capable of demonstrating how the declension of the memory of ancient republics and the cult of the past succeeded in acquiring ethical and civic values, impulses with which even public institutions were invested.

However, any consideration of the ISECS - SIESD Colloquium in almost exclusive terms of reflecting on the links that bind the history of the West to its deepest and most distant roots would risk being misleading. In fact, as the organizers of the Colloquium, we have been careful, from the very first stages of its organization, to encourage potential speakers not to get caught up in the rigidity of Eurocentrism, and also to question the relations that various non-European civilisations had with the founding fathers of the societies to which they belonged. And so, in the name of the refusal – shared by many, if not all – to remain entangled in identities that are as elusive as they are dangerous, we welcomed contributions that included studies of the forms, times and ways in which societies geographically distant from the old continent related to their ancients in the century that matters most to us.

In the background is the once again polyvalent major theme of the circulation of figures, protagonists and cultures between purely distant spaces, which in turn is linked to the question of the translation of texts and the related mechanisms of reception. In what ways did other times and territories give rise to ideally characterised retrospective visions? Was the concept of the universal classic the preserve of the West alone, or did it also mature in areas outside the West? And to what extent were the disputes over the Greek and/or Latin canon transposed into the aesthetic, philosophical, legal and ethical elaborations developed by civilisations that differed from the West in terms of characteristics, balances and forms of internal organisation?

These are just a few of the many questions that ran through the days of the World Congress on the Eighteenth Century. Unable to give a precise and detailed account of them, precisely because of their richness and multiplicity, I will confine myself to noting that, among the hundreds of contributions devoted to the affirma-

tion of antiquarianism and its epigones, known and not so known, particular curiosity was aroused by those that focused on the use of antiquity in the elaboration of future-oriented planning. This was fully in line with the call for papers, which invited participants to avoid reading the subject as a static and timeless category. The contributions placed on this ridge have in fact attracted the most attention and have come to represent the most innovative figure of the possible declinations of the point under consideration. In particular, this interest proved to be as strong as ever among young people, girls and boys, not yet academically structured, who, in the days preceding the World Colloquium, had already participated in a one-week seminar dedicated to them on the subject of *The Forms of Time in the Age of Enlightenment*. Obviously, the course, which was a kind of prelude to the subject of antiquity and its various uses in the eighteenth century, had succeeded in sharpening sensitivities and expectations that were sometimes latent, helped by the splendid setting of the representative seat of the University of Rome Tor Vergata, Villa Mondragone (Monte Porzio Catone), which hosted the meeting.

The results of such comparisons between scholars of different backgrounds and training, and at different stages in their careers, will soon see the light of day in a special publication. More difficult – or rather impossible – would have been to collect the hundreds of papers offered at the World Conference proper. Given the objective impossibility of presenting all the papers discussed in July 2023, and in the common desire to avoid making a painful and arbitrary choice among them, the ISECS-SISSD organs agreed that it might nevertheless be useful to give written form at least to the keynote speeches that launched the work of the various sessions. Hence the present special issue of the SISSD journal “Eighteenth Century”, an expression of the desire to leave a trace of a fruitful and totalising scientific experience, not least by providing the main coordinates of the problems and sub-themes addressed. To its authors, who are among the most representative scholars of eighteenth-century studies in the world, we therefore offer our collective thanks, to which I would like to add my personal thanks and my hope that the resumption of the dialogue between the ancient and the modern will encourage a commitment to mutual respect and confrontation in that harmonious and cosmopolitan dimension that we have inherited from the Age of Enlightenment.

In any case, I could not conclude these brief notes without paying a warm tribute to those who have worked concretely and “behind the scenes” to ensure the success of a demanding work that has taken years to prepare: I refer to the governing bodies of the Italian Soci-

ety for Eighteenth-Century Studies and, in particular, to Silvia Tatti. On behalf of all of us, I would also like to thank FASI - Communication Events and its director, Fabrizia Rossetti.

A due mention, finally, to the prestigious institutions that believed in this initiative:

Presidency of the Italian Republic,
European Parliament,
Ministry of Culture,
Ministry of Education,
Municipality of Rome,
Central Board of Historical Studies,
Rome Foundation,
Association of Italianists,
Accademia dell’Arcadia,
Isem/CNR,
Institute of Roman Studies,
École française de Rome,
Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología en Roma.
Vi.Ve. (Vittoriano - Palazzo Venezia),
Camillo Caetani Foundation.

To these must certainly be added the “Sapienza University of Rome” - Sapienza Crea and the University of Rome Tor Vergata, with their respective Faculties and Macroarea of Humanities, for their active willingness with which they hosted our work.

Marina Formica



Citation: Charles, S. (2025). Entre fidélité à l'Antiquité et quête de modernité : l'impossible scepticisme des Lumières. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 7-13. doi: 10.36253/ds-15564

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Entre fidélité à l'Antiquité et quête de modernité : l'impossible scepticisme des Lumières

SÉBASTIEN CHARLES

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Québec

Abstract. Contrairement à la présentation encore prégnante d'un siècle des Lumières marqué par le culte de la Raison, cet article montre en quoi le scepticisme a été un courant essentiel au XVIII^e siècle. À cet égard, il suit l'évolution de la pensée de Richard Popkin, passée d'une remise en question de l'idée même d'un scepticisme des Lumières à la conception d'un XVIII^e français entièrement gangrené par le scepticisme, sans toutefois aller aussi loin dans ses conclusions. En effet, plutôt que de plaider en faveur de la présence d'un scepticisme radical propre au XVIII^e siècle, mieux vaut parler d'un scepticisme modéré, qui traverse d'ailleurs les frontières entre partisans et adversaires de l'esprit des Lumières. C'est ce scepticisme modéré qui est avant tout caractéristique du pyrrhonisme des Lumières, où l'on encourage chacun à penser par lui-même et à se méfier des préjugés et de toute forme de dogmatisme.

Keywords: Académisme, Cartésianisme, Lumières, Métaphysique, Pyrrhonisme, Relativisme, Scepticisme, Sens commun, Vraisemblance.

Que le scepticisme ait joué un rôle majeur à l'âge classique, c'est une évidence, et on ne compte plus aujourd'hui le nombre d'ouvrages qui ont été consacrés à la question, rappelant pour certains l'influence du pyrrhonisme sur la pensée de Montaigne, Huet ou Bayle, pour d'autres celle du doute radical sur la philosophie de Descartes, Pascal ou Hume¹. Reste que, si l'on excepte Hume, tous les auteurs précédemment cités appartiennent au XVI^e et, surtout, au XVII^e siècle, comme si le scepticisme ne semblait plus correspondre aux préoccupations des Lumières. Bref, en paraphrasant Montesquieu, on peut dire à bon droit que l'une des grandes interrogations du siècle des Lumières a été celle de savoir comment l'on pouvait être non pas persan mais sceptique, et plus particulièrement pyrrhonien. De fait, rares ont été les philosophes du XVIII^e siècle à se présenter comme authentiquement et intégralement sceptiques, et le cas de Hume, clarifiant le statut de son scepticisme dans l'*Enquête* et les *Dialogues* en distinguant un scepticisme

¹ On trouvera un état de la question exhaustif dans les trois ouvrages suivants : *Scepticism in the Eighteenth Century. Enlightenment, Lumières, Aufklärung*, ed. by S. Charles et P. Junqueira Smith, Springer, Dordrecht 2013 ; *Pour et contre le scepticisme. Théories et pratiques de l'antiquité aux Lumières*, éd. par É. Argaud et al., Honoré Champion, Paris 2015, et *Academic Skepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by S. Charles et P. Junqueira Smith, Springer, Dordrecht 2017.

ridicule parce qu'exagéré, celui des pyrrhoniens, d'un scepticisme méthodique et sérieux, celui des académiciens, est exemplaire du sort réservé par le XVIII^e siècle au pyrrhonisme². Et c'est d'ailleurs là la thèse du grand historien du scepticisme moderne, Richard Popkin, du moins au début de son œuvre, avant qu'il ne la révise peu à peu, sans pour autant, à mon sens, saisir toute la complexité du phénomène.

Si je n'ai pas l'ambition dans cet article de démêler l'ensemble de cet écheveau compliqué, j'aimerais malgré tout revenir sur l'interprétation de Richard Popkin, qui a eu le mérite de gagner en nuances au fil du temps, avant de montrer en quoi elle reste pourtant limitée pour qui veut vraiment comprendre ce que fut le scepticisme des Lumières, voire les scepticismes des Lumières, partagés entre deux formes de scepticisme, ancien et moderne, ou pyrrhonien et académicien si l'on veut reprendre le *distingo* de Hume, qui ont, de manière inégale, irrigué le XVIII^e siècle français.

1. À PROPOS DE QUELQUES VARIATIONS ET AMBIGUÏTÉS POPKINIENNES

Quelques mots pour commencer concernant l'interprétation à géométrie variable du scepticisme des Lumières par celui qui passe encore pour l'un des plus grands historiens du scepticisme moderne, à savoir Richard Popkin. Dans un article programmatique de 1963 explicitement consacré à la question, comme l'indique son titre, «Scepticism in the Enlightenment», ce dernier avance que, mis à part la figure incontournable de Hume, «il n'y avait, et ce, de manière quelque peu surprenante, que très peu de scepticisme au siècle des Lumières»³. Bien sûr, Popkin est conscient de l'influence toujours active d'un Montaigne ou d'un Bayle sur les Lumières et il sait fort bien que le public savant dispose depuis 1718 d'une édition grecque et latine de l'œuvre de Sextus Empiricus qui a été suivie en 1725 d'une traduction française des *Hypotyposes pyrrhoniennes*. Sans compter la parution posthume en 1723 du *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain* de Huet, qui fait la part belle au scepticisme, et, celle, dix ans plus tard, de l'*Examen du pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne* de

Crousaz, ouvrage qui a contribué à relancer la discussion autour du scepticisme, malgré sa finalité avouée de réfuter les pyrrhoniens en général, et Bayle en particulier. Bref, difficile de nier la présence du scepticisme dans la première partie du siècle. Pour autant, selon Popkin, ces différents courants ou usages sceptiques n'ont pas connu de développement majeur permettant de former une contre-culture suffisamment puissante pour s'opposer au rationalisme dogmatique des Lumières. Bref, le scepticisme ne constitue en rien un des traits dominants d'un siècle placé sous le signe du progrès des connaissances et des réalisations techniques, évolution exprimée dans toute sa quintessence par le projet encyclopédique de Diderot et d'Alembert. Dès lors, Popkin en était venu à conclure que le XVIII^e siècle représentait «comme un hiatus dans le développement continu du scepticisme»⁴, ce qui faisait à ses yeux de Hume «le seul sceptique vivant»⁵.

Cette position tranchée est tout sauf évidente. D'abord, Popkin avait suffisamment d'érudition pour ne pas savoir que des renvois explicites ou implicites à la question sceptique figuraient au menu de nombre d'ouvrages du XVIII^e siècle, que ce soit pour rappeler l'intérêt de la démarche sceptique, comme ce fut le cas pour *La philosophie du bon sens* de Boyer d'Argens (1737), les *Recherches philosophiques sur la nécessité de s'assurer par soi-même de la vérité* de Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe (1743), le *Pyrrhonisme du sage* de Beausobre⁶ (1754) ou encore le *Philosophe ignorant* de Voltaire (1766)⁷, ou bien pour en dénoncer les conséquences, comme le fit par exemple l'abbé Boncerf en 1762 en s'essayant à son tour à une réfutation du pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne⁸, reprenant pour cela le travail de Formey qui avait pro-

⁴ Ivi, p. 13.

⁵ R. Popkin, *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in the Latter Part of the Eighteenth Century* [1976], in *Scepticism*, cit., p. 19.

⁶ Sur le scepticisme de Beausobre, on se reportera à la notice que lui a consacrée John Christian Laursen dans le *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers*, ed. by H. Klemme et M. Huehn, Thoemmes Press, Bristol 2008 et à notre *Des excès dogmatiques à la guérison sceptique : le pyrrhonisme raisonnable de Beausobre*, «Libertinage et philosophie au xviii^e siècle», 12, 2009, pp. 205-217.

⁷ Sur le rapport ambigu entretenu par Voltaire à l'égard du scepticisme et des sceptiques anciens et modernes, voir mon article *Entre pyrrhonisme et académisme : le scepticisme de Voltaire*, «Cahiers Voltaire», 11, 2012, pp. 109-131 ainsi que les contributions de Lorenzo Bianchi (sur Voltaire et Bayle) et Marc-André Nadeau (sur Voltaire et Montaigne) parues dans *Voltaire philosophe*, éd. par S. Charles et S. Pujol, Société Voltaire, Ferney 2017.

⁸ C.J. Boncerf, *Le vrai philosophe, ou l'usage de la philosophie relative à la société civile, à la vérité et à la vertu, avec l'histoire, l'exposition exacte et la réfutation du pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne*, Paris, Rabuty fils et Brocas l'aîné, 1762. À propos de l'abbé Boncerf, on pourra se référer à la notice que j'ai fait paraître dans le *Dictionnaire des anti-Lumières et des antiphilosophes (France, 1715-1815)*, éd. par D. Masseau, Honoré Champion, Paris 2016.

² Voir notamment ce que j'en dis dans *Pyrrhonisme et académisme dans les Dialogues sur la religion naturelle : Hume lecteur de Foucher*, éd. par S. Charles, *Hume et la religion*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim 2013, pp. 35-50 ainsi que, dans le même volume, la contribution de S. Giocanti, *Les lieux du scepticisme dans les Dialogues sur la religion naturelle de Hume*, cit., pp. 73-94.

³ R. Popkin, *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* [1963], in ed. by R.H. Popkin et al, *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1997, p. 1.

posé six ans auparavant, sous le titre non équivoque de *Triomphe de l'évidence*, une refonte du volumineux *Examen du pyrrhonisme* de Crousaz⁹. Ensuite, ayant porté relativement tôt un intérêt aux manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l'âge classique, il devait savoir que nombre d'entre eux se présentaient sous les traits du scepticisme¹⁰, que ce soient les *Arguments du pyrrhonisme*, l'*Art de ne rien croire*, les *Essais sur la recherche de la vérité* ou bien encore *La promenade du sceptique* de Diderot, et qu'une pléthore de manuscrits avaient choisi pour des raisons stratégiques de se présenter sous la forme d'un catalogue de prétendus doutes, l'archétype du genre étant peut-être les *Doutes des pyrrhoniens*¹¹.

Il faudra pourtant attendre 1992 pour que Popkin reconnaisse enfin que le scepticisme des Lumières «était plus fondamental et plus subtil qu'[il] ne l'avait imaginé, en dépit de l'optimisme scientifique et de la croyance dans un possible progrès sans fin de la connaissance humaine partagés par les penseurs les plus notables de cette époque»¹². Ce retournement est avant tout dû à sa lecture entretemps des travaux d'Ezequiel de Olaso, Giorgio Tonelli et Keith Baker allant dans le sens d'une réhabilitation de la dimension sceptique au sein de la pensée des Lumières. Mais pour avoir moi-même étudié sérieusement les thèses de ces trois auteurs, et les penseurs des Lumières auxquels ils font référence – Rousseau, Changeux et Condorcet –, on ne trouve rien de particulièrement neuf dans leurs interprétations permettant de remettre en question l'hypothèse de départ de Popkin.

D'abord, ce n'est pas parce que Rousseau, dans la *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard*, reprend en partie des arguments montaniens tirés de l'*Apologie de Raymond Sebond*, qu'il peut figurer parmi les disciples de Pyrrhon, ainsi que semble le croire Ezequiel de Olaso¹³.

Car, comme Rousseau le dit lui-même, rien ne lui est plus étranger que le pyrrhonisme, qui est au mieux une doctrine de poseurs qui permet de se pavaner dans les salons littéraires¹⁴, au pire une arme utilisée pour miner l'ordre social et politique existant, ce qui revient à adopter finalement une position dogmatique. D'où la fameuse expression de Rousseau : «je ne connais personne de si dogmatique que les sceptiques d'aujourd'hui»¹⁵. Sans compter que, pour Rousseau, le fondement même de la démarche sceptique, à savoir la suspension du jugement, n'a aucune justification naturelle, car l'on préfère naturellement croire et non douter, l'être humain «aim[ant] mieux se tromper que ne rien croire»¹⁶.

Ensuite, ce n'est parce que l'on peut critiquer à bon droit la thèse du rationalisme des Lumières, comme l'a fait Giorgio Tonelli¹⁷, que celles-ci basculent pour autant du côté d'un scepticisme radical. Tonelli fait bien de rappeler que la raison des Lumières est une raison qui se donne à elle-même ses propres limites et établit avec prudence le domaine du savoir en assignant des bornes strictes à la connaissance. On peut, avec lui, parler de scepticisme méthodologique ou raisonnable, destiné à juguler les prétentions idéalistes de la raison humaine, et reconnaître son influence tout au long du siècle. Mais difficile d'aller plus loin. Et le philosophe qu'il convoque en faveur de sa thèse, Pierre-Jacques Changeux¹⁸, auteur d'un *Traité des Extrêmes*¹⁹ en 1767, n'est en rien en rupture avec ce scepticisme mitigé propre aux Lumières. En réalité, plus qu'un scepticisme radical, Changeux nous propose une forme de perspectivisme perceptif pour lequel la connaissance vraie se situe deux extrêmes, l'infinie grandeur et l'infinie petitesse. Connaître véritablement, c'est chercher à se rapprocher au plus près du juste milieu entre grandeur et petitesse, et le scepticisme joue ici encore un rôle propédeutique. Si l'on réduit le scep-

⁹ J.H.S. Formey, *Le triomphe de l'évidence, avec un discours préliminaire par M. de Haller*, Lange, Berlin 1756, 2 vol. Le résumé de Formey, composé dans les années 1730, avait déjà été publié en allemand par Haller cinq ans auparavant : *Prüfung der Secte die an allem zweifelt*, Vandenhoeck, Göttingen 1751.

¹⁰ Sur le scepticisme clandestin, voir notre *Scepticisme et clandestinité*, «Historia philosophica», 5, 2007, pp. 143-158, qui fait le point sur la question.

¹¹ Concernant ce manuscrit, voire les deux articles que lui a consacré G. Paganini : *Scepsi clandestina : i Doutes des pyrrhoniens*, in *Filosofia e religione nella letteratura clandestina*, a cura di dans G. Canziani, Franco Angeli, Milan 1994, pp. 83-122 et *Du bon usage du scepticisme : les Doutes des pyrrhoniens*, éd. par A. McKenna et A. Mothu, *La philosophie clandestine à l'âge classique*, Universitas/Voltaire Foundation, Paris/Oxford 1997, pp. 291-306.

¹² R. Popkin, *News Views on the Role of Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, in Popkin, *Scepticism*, cit., p. 157.

¹³ E. de Olaso, *Los dos escepticismos del vicario saboyano* [1980], in *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy. Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin*, ed. by R.A. Watson et J.E. Force, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1988, pp.

43-57. Sur Rousseau et le scepticisme, voir également M.-A. Nadeau, *Le scepticisme de Rousseau dans La profession de foi du vicaire savoyard*, «Lumen», 25, 2006, pp. 29-40.

¹⁴ Voir à ce propos le texte explicite de la préface de *Narcisse*, dans J.J. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris 1964, t. II, p. 965.

¹⁵ *Émile* (manuscrit Fabre), variante (b), dans J.J. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, t. IV, cit., p. 1283.

¹⁶ *Émile*, dans J.J. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, t. IV, cit., pp. 567-568. Voir également *Lettre à Voltaire*, dans *Ivi*, pp. 1070-1071.

¹⁷ G. Tonelli, *The 'Weakness' of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment* [1971], in *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, ed. by R.H. Popkin et al., Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1997, pp. 35-50.

¹⁸ G. Tonelli, *Pierre-Jacques Changeux and Scepticism in the French Enlightenment* [1974], in Popkin, *Scepticism*, cit., pp. 51-68.

¹⁹ P.J. Changeux, *Traité des Extrêmes, ou des éléments de la science de la réalité*, Darkstée & Merkus, Amsterdam 1767, 2 t. Un résumé du livre de Changeux par Vallet a été publié en 1772 dans le dix-huitième volume de l'*Encyclopédie d'Yverdon* et a été reproduit par la suite dans le tome II du *Supplément de l'Encyclopédie* de Diderot en 1776 sous l'article «Extrême».

ticisme strictement à cette fonction, on peut alors effectivement conclure, avec Tonelli, «qu'il est probablement justifié de le considérer comme le courant méthodologique le plus dominant de cette époque»²⁰. Mais c'est réduire le scepticisme à peu de choses que d'en faire seulement un guide pour la raison théorique.

C'est ce même scepticisme raisonnable que Keith Baker a attribué à Condorcet, montrant en quoi il n'est pas indissociable de son optimisme légendaire²¹. Il faut en effet le voir comme un juste milieu acceptable entre dogmatisme radical et pyrrhonisme radical, comme Condorcet le mentionne dans ses *Notes sur Voltaire* : «Un sceptique qui n'admettrait pas les différents degrés de probabilité serait un fou ; un sceptique qui les admet ne diffère des dogmatiques qu'en ce qu'il cherche à démêler ces différents degrés avec plus de subtilité»²². Dès lors, les sciences peuvent construire leur objet sur fond de scepticisme raisonnable, c'est-à-dire à partir d'un scepticisme adapté aux découvertes des modernes et à la théorie des probabilités qui les sous-tend²³. Mais de là à faire de Condorcet un sceptique radical, comme le veut Popkin, ou à faire de son traitement des probabilités «l'épistémologie sceptique la plus avancée de tous les philosophes des Lumières»²⁴, c'est passer d'un excès à un autre et ne pas voir que l'utilisation proposée ici du scepticisme n'a rien de bien original au XVIII^e siècle. À trop vouloir rompre avec son intuition de jeunesse, Popkin a eu tendance, dans ses derniers travaux consacrés au scepticisme des Lumières, à surévaluer l'importance de figures mineures afin de construire une succession de personnages sceptiques pouvant combler le hiatus qu'il avait signalé lors de sa première enquête sur le sujet.

Dernier exemple quelque peu symptomatique d'une telle interprétation, la lecture proposée par Popkin de l'épistémologie dominante de l'Académie de Berlin, à laquelle il s'est intéressé à la fin de sa vie²⁵. Si les sources

sceptiques sont mieux maîtrisées par les membres de l'Académie, son rôle n'en reste pas moins méthodologique et stratégique, puisqu'il s'agit de l'utiliser en grande partie contre le nouveau dogmatisme qui pointe alors en Allemagne, à savoir le kantisme²⁶. Pour le reste, la condamnation des excès sceptiques est partagée avec leurs contemporains, ce qui les conduit à distinguer un scepticisme utile, qui indique à la raison ses bornes naturelles et permet d'éviter les pièges du dogmatisme philosophique, d'un scepticisme pernicieux, qui n'est au fond que le paravent intellectuel des athées et des libertins²⁷. C'est pourquoi, par exemple, les traductions par Castillon des *Academica* de Cicéron et d'une partie de l'*Adversus mathematicos* de Sextus Empiricus à la fin des années 1770²⁸ proposent des commentaires critiques permettant de déminer la charge sceptique de certains textes²⁹, surtout quand ils pourraient conduire assez naturellement leur lecteur à emprunter la pente de l'athéisme. Même chose d'ailleurs quand, quelques années auparavant, l'Académie avait fait paraître une traduction allemande (1755) puis française (1758) de Hume. Que ce soit Sulzer³⁰ pour le texte allemand, ou Mérian³¹ pour le texte français traduit par Formey³², un même souci d'adoucissement des thèses sceptiques est à l'œuvre afin de préserver les lecteurs de la conclusion à laquelle ils pourraient parvenir en suivant Hume, à savoir qu'il n'existe pas plus de substance spirituelle qu'il n'existe de substance matérielle. Cette critique de la dangerosité humienne sera d'ailleurs un trait partagé chez les membres de l'Académie, plus spécifiquement chez Mérian³³ et Ancillon, ce dernier étant d'ailleurs

«Libertinage et philosophie au xviii^e siècle», 12, 2009, pp. 219-228.

²⁶ Cf. F. Holz, *Kant et l'Académie de Berlin*, Peter Lang, Francfort 1981.

²⁷ Sur ce double emploi du scepticisme au sein de l'Académie de Berlin, voir notre article, *Lumières allemandes et scepticisme : le cas de l'Académie de Berlin*, in *Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie dans l'Europe des Lumières*, éd. par M.H. Quéval, Presses de l'Université de Rennes, Rennes 2010, pp. 139-149.

²⁸ *Livres académiques de Cicéron traduits et éclaircis par Mr. de Castillon*, Decker, Berlin 1779, 2 vol.

²⁹ J.C. Laursen and R. Popkin, *Sources of Knowledge of Sextus Empiricus in Kant's Time: A French Translation of Sextus Empiricus from the Prussian Academy*, 1779, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 6, 1998, 2, pp. 261-267. Sur Castillon, voir également l'article de J.C. Laursen, *Cicero in the Prussian Academy: Castillon's Translation of the Academica*, «History of European Ideas», 23, 1997, 2-4, pp. 117-126.

³⁰ Hume, *Philosophische Versuche über die Menschliche Erkenntniß*, Hamburg und Leipzig, 1755.

³¹ Cf. J.C. Laursen and R. Popkin, *Hume in the Prussian Academy: Jean Bernard Mérian's 'On the Phenomenalism of David Hume'*, «Hume Studies», 23, 1997, pp. 153-191.

³² Hume, *Essais philosophiques sur l'entendement humain*, Amsterdam, 1758, 2 vol.

³³ J.B. Mérian, *Sur le phénoménisme de David Hume*, in *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles Lettres depuis l'avènement de Frédéric Guillaume II au trône*, George Decker, Berlin 1798, pp. 417-437.

²⁰ Tonelli, *Pierre-Jacques Changeux*, cit., p. 54.

²¹ K.M. Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1975.

²² Condorcet, *Notes sur Voltaire*, dans *Œuvres de Condorcet*, ed. by O'Connor et Arago, Firmin Didot frères, Paris 1847, t. IV, p. 559.

²³ Condorcet, *Discours sur l'astronomie et le calcul des probabilités*, dans *Œuvres de Condorcet*, t. I, cit., p. 502 : «Les connaissances que nous nommons certaines ne sont réellement que des connaissances fondées sur une très grande probabilité, et cependant c'est du sein de cette espèce de phénomène que nous tirons les véritables preuves de l'absurdité du scepticisme absolu des philosophes de l'antiquité».

²⁴ R. Popkin, *Brissot and Condorcet: Skeptical Philosophers*, in *The Skeptical Tradition around 1800. Scepticism in Philosophy, Science, and Society*, ed. by R.H. Popkin et J. Van der Zande, Kluwer Dordrecht, 1998, p. 36.

²⁵ C'est d'ailleurs à une telle conclusion qu'est parvenu tout récemment J.C. Laursen, *Swiss Anti-skeptics in Berlin*, in *Schweizer im Berlin des 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by M. Fontius and H. Holzhey, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1996, pp. 261-282, et *Tame Skeptics at the Prussian Academy*,

l'auteur d'un mémoire sur la certitude humaine³⁴ et d'un dialogue fictif entre Hume et Berkeley³⁵. Au fond, les membres de l'institution berlinoise ont préféré adopter le scepticisme raisonné et limité de leur temps qui s'oppose aux formes outrées du dogmatisme, philosophiques bien sûr, mais aussi religieuses, ce qui permet de condamner tout type éventuel de fanatisme.

2. LES LUMIÈRES ET LA PLURALITÉ SCEPTIQUE

À l'issue de cette analyse critique de la position de Popkin par rapport à la définition que l'on peut donner du scepticisme des Lumières, disons que le scepticisme raisonnable semble être ce qui le caractérise le mieux, et qu'il est le fait de Lumières modérées³⁶ où le conservatisme politique et la promotion d'une religiosité débarrassée des excès de la superstition s'appuient sur une utilisation subtile et maîtrisée d'un scepticisme édulcoré et en grande partie dévitalisé. C'est sans nul doute la version dominante du scepticisme des Lumières, mais ce n'est pourtant pas la seule. Si l'on veut résumer la chose d'un mot, disons que la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle est davantage marquée par un scepticisme que je qualifierais de pyrrhonien et de radical, dont les enjeux sont issus du cartésianisme et portent sur des questions qui sont davantage d'ordre métaphysique et ontologique, et que la seconde est davantage imprégnée par un scepticisme de tendance académique, où le doute est d'abord vu comme un instrument critique permettant de parvenir au vrai. On ne peut en effet nier la persistance, jusque dans les années 1730-1740, de problématiques proprement cartésiennes, inspirées en partie de Descartes mais aussi de ses adversaires (Bayle, Pascal, Huet, Foucher), qui portent sur toute une série de questions d'ordre métaphysique : existence du monde extérieur, distinction entre matière et étendue et union de ces deux substances, éternité et infinité du monde, ori-

gine et nature du mouvement, etc. À cela s'ajoutent des considérations morales et religieuses, qu'un manuscrit notamment met bien en valeur, à savoir *L'Art de ne rien croire*³⁷, où le scepticisme conduit finalement à la suspension du jugement tant à l'égard des dogmes moraux que théologiques, l'auteur anonyme encourageant son lecteur en conclusion à se fier au sens commun et à suivre la nature, retrouvant là l'essence même du pyrrhonisme : « enfin, plus de raison, plus de discours, plus de certitude, plus d'erreur. Reviens nature ! Ne discourons plus ; sentons, vivons et ignorons tout avec tranquillité »³⁸.

Très présentes dans la littérature clandestine du début du siècle, ces questions vont peu à peu perdre de leur intérêt avec le temps, et Hume est peut-être le seul véritable continuateur de ce courant au XVIII^e siècle, même si l'œuvre de Voltaire en gardera également des traces notables. Le même Voltaire a bien noté que le scepticisme avait et devait changer de sens et de fonction, en particulier du fait de la révolution newtonienne qui s'impose peu à peu aux esprits du XVIII^e siècle³⁹. Dès lors, le scepticisme des Lumières ne peut plus être du même acabit que celui du Grand Siècle, parce que change aussi l'idée même que l'on se fait de la métaphysique et du système philosophique qui prétend expliquer l'ensemble du réel. Et c'est sans doute parce qu'il n'y a plus de dogmatisme intégral que le scepticisme radical perd sa raison d'être et se cantonne désormais à une démarche méthodologique certes nécessaire, mais qui a trouvé son cran d'arrêt naturel. Voilà pourquoi Voltaire peut écrire au comte Des Alleurs le 26 novembre 1738 : « Ce ne sera donc point, monsieur, sur la physique que je serai entièrement pyrrhonien, car comment douter de ce que l'expérience découvre, et de ce que la géométrie

³⁴ L.F. Ancillon, *Mémoire sur la certitude, et en particulier sur la nature de la certitude humaine*, in *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale*, cit., pp. 438-474.

³⁵ L.-F. Ancillon, *Dialogue entre Berkeley et Hume*, in *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale*, 1799, cit., pp. 86-127. Cf. S. Charles, J.C. Laursen, R. Popkin and A. Zakatistovs, *Hume and Berkeley in the Prussian Academy: Louis Frédéric Ancillon's 'Dialogue between Berkeley and Hume'* of 1796, « *Hume Studies* », 27, 2001, 1, pp. 85-97.

³⁶ Ces deux expressions de « Lumières radicales » (*Radical Enlightenment*) et « Lumières modérées » (*Moderate Enlightenment*) ont été proposées récemment par J. Israel dans *Enlightenment Contested*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006. Mais on peut préférer utiliser l'expression qu'emploie J.G.A. Pocock de « Conservative Enlightenment » au lieu de « Moderate Enlightenment », expression reprise par W. Velema, *Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic*, Van Gorcum, Assen 1993.

³⁷ Sur ce texte, voir M.H. Cotoni, *L'exégèse du Nouveau Testament dans la philosophie française du XVIII^e siècle*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 1984, et *Dénigrement de la Providence et défense des valeurs chrétiennes dans les manuscrits clandestins de la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle*, in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 1976, pp. 497-513 ; A. McKenna, *De Pascal à Voltaire. Le rôle des Pensées de Pascal dans l'histoire des idées de 1670 à 1734*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1990, et *Les Pensées de Pascal dans les manuscrits clandestins du XVIII^e siècle*, in *Le matérialisme du XVIII^e siècle et la littérature clandestine*, éd. par O. Bloch, Vrin, Paris 1982, pp. 137-40 ; A. Mothu, *La Béatitude des chrestiens et son double clandestin*, in éd. par A. McKenna et A. Mothu, *La philosophie clandestine à l'âge classique*, Universitas/Voltaire Foundation, Paris/Oxford 1997, pp. 79-128. Sur le scepticisme clandestin en général, voir notre *Scepticisme et clandestinité*, « *Historia philosophica* », 5, 2007, pp. 143-158.

³⁸ *L'Art de ne rien croire*, ff. 135-136.

³⁹ Lors de la discussion qui a suivi mon intervention sur ce sujet lors du congrès de la SIEDS à Rome début août 2023, Véronique Le Ru a insisté, avec raison, sur le travail essentiel d'Émilie du Châtelet et de Voltaire comme passeurs de la tradition newtonienne en France, que ce soit grâce à la publication par Voltaire des *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton* en 1738 ou par celle des *Institutions de physique* de Mme du Châtelet en 1740.

confirme ? (...). Tout cela est peu de chose pour l'immensité de la nature, j'en conviens ; mais c'est beaucoup pour la faiblesse de l'homme »⁴⁰.

Si ce mot de Voltaire résume l'esprit du temps à l'égard d'un scepticisme incontournable parce que nécessaire à l'enquête philosophique, mais critiquable dans sa forme la plus radicale, c'est bien parce que cette vision du scepticisme est assez unanimement partagée, d'ailleurs autant par les philosophes des Lumières que par leurs adversaires. À cet égard, les considérations sur le pyrrhonisme de Claude Joseph Boncerf, qui constituent un supplément au *Vrai philosophe* paru en 1762, s'inspirent des mêmes auteurs qu'un Voltaire ou un Diderot : Bayle bien sûr, mais aussi Crousaz, La Mothe le Vayer, Huet ou Deslandes. De même, on trouve dans ces considérations la dénonciation rituelle des excès propres au scepticisme antique (l'apraxie) et au scepticisme moderne (le solipsisme) et la présentation du pyrrhonien comme un cas pathologique, sa douce folie consistant à s'en tenir toujours au doute alors même qu'il est battu en brèche par l'évidence au plan théorique⁴¹ et par les nécessités de la vie au plan pratique. Bref, le pyrrhonisme représente une maladie qui renvoie à un certain nombre de passions dominantes, dont l'amour-propre, comme le mentionnait déjà Rousseau⁴².

Et voilà bien un point que l'analyse de Popkin a totalement manqué : si les Lumières sont en partie sceptiques, les anti-Lumières ne le sont pas moins, ayant adopté elles aussi une forme de « pyrrhonisme raisonnable »⁴³. J'en veux pour preuve le *Pyrrhonien raisonnable*⁴⁴ du comte d'Autrey, paru en 1766, qui cherche à défendre l'idée d'une religion chrétienne qui s'appuie sur

une analyse du probable en matière de foi, développée à partir de raisonnements simples, naturels et sensibles, plutôt que théoriques et complexes, et qui vise à parvenir à une certitude morale et non mathématique. L'important n'est pas la présence de présumées contradictions au niveau des détails (encore faut-il montrer qu'il s'agit bien de contradictions) mais la prise en compte du sens général du texte révélé, qui doit conduire un homme de bonne foi à le juger vraisemblable et à voir dans l'ordre naturel la main de l'architecte divin. Voilà donc ce que peut être un pyrrhonien raisonnable, un philosophe qui doute et qui accepte de ne pas pouvoir prouver sa foi par la raison, mais qui n'en reconnaît pas moins sa vraisemblance au niveau historique, sa plausibilité tirée de la mécanique mondaine qui suppose un être intelligent, sans compter son utilité au niveau moral – le tout sans recourir à de prétendues preuves surnaturelles.

Plutôt que de voir dans le pyrrhonien un adversaire déclaré, qui ne serait en réalité qu'un athée déguisé⁴⁵ qui se sert des arguments sceptiques pour montrer que la révélation n'est rien d'autre qu'une supercherie et la religion le fruit de l'imposture politique, comme c'est le cas pour bien des théologiens de l'époque, la thèse d'Autrey vise à montrer que le scepticisme raisonné peut aussi être un scepticisme partagé, et elle n'est pas sans rappeler celle d'un Voltaire, qui a su faire du pyrrhonisme la pierre de touche d'une pensée qui se refuse à toute réduction systématique. Ainsi, dans son traitement de la métaphysique, fait d'oppositions des sectes entre elles, de mises en garde contre l'esprit de système et de dénonciations de l'orgueil dogmatique, Voltaire s'inspire explicitement de l'entreprise sceptique, dans sa forme pyrrhonienne quand il en vient à pratiquer l'*epochè* dans des domaines où la vérité lui semble introuvable, mais aussi dans sa forme académicienne quand il accorde une place centrale à la notion de vraisemblable, tout en rejetant les excès radicaux d'un certain scepticisme⁴⁶. Car le doute radical à ses limites, notamment au niveau de la morale, où l'on ne peut se contenter du relativisme des anciens sceptiques ni s'en tenir uniquement à suivre la nature et le sens commun. En homme de son siècle, Voltaire conçoit le fait qu'il existe une morale universelle que chacun peut découvrir en faisant usage de sa raison et de

⁴⁰ Voltaire à Rolland Puchot, comte Des Alleurs, 26 novembre 1738.

⁴¹ C'est ce que disait déjà Hayer dans *La religion vengée*, Chaubert, Paris, 1757, t. I, p. 35 : « Comme il n'est pas possible de supposer qu'un homme doute sérieusement de sa propre existence, il ne faut que cette certitude, pour faire au Pyrrhonien des retorsions sans réplique. En effet s'il connoît certainement son existence, il y a donc une marque infaillible de vérité ». Voir également p. 41 : « L'évidence, Monsieur, est une marque certaine de vérité. On en convient unanimement. C'est elle qui me dit que si je pense, j'existe ; que deux choses égales à une troisième, sont égales entre elles ; que tout effet suppose une cause ».

⁴² C.J. Boncerf, *Le vrai philosophe, ou l'usage de la philosophie relativement à la société civile, à la vérité et à la vertu*, Babuty et Brocas, Paris 1762, p. 379 : « Parmi les causes du pyrrhonisme, je remarque d'abord la vanité, la paresse et la corruption du cœur encore plus que l'aveuglement de l'esprit. Les hommes sont naturellement curieux ou désireux de savoir, ils aiment à briller ou à se distinguer en se faisant un nom parmi les savants ; ils tâchent de trouver des raisons ou des prétextes spécieux pour secouer le joug importun de la loi qui gêne leurs penchants. Comme le pyrrhonisme fournit ou semble fournir de quoi satisfaire tous ces goûts et toutes ces passions différentes, on l'embrasse, on s'y livre avec plaisir ».

⁴³ J.B. Autrey, *Le pyrrhonien raisonnable ou méthode nouvelle proposée aux incrédules par M. l'abbé de ****, Jean Neaulme, La Haye 1765.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. III.

⁴⁵ Comme l'a bien vu J.S. Spink dans 'Pyrrhonien' et 'sceptique' synonymes de 'matérialiste' dans la littérature clandestine, in O. Bloch (dir.), *Le matérialisme du XVIII^e siècle et la littérature clandestine*, Vrin, Paris 1982, pp. 143-148.

⁴⁶ Cf. l'article « Athée, athéisme » du *Dictionnaire philosophique* : « Chez les gentils, plusieurs sectes n'avaient aucun frein : les sceptiques doutaient de tout ; les épicuriens étaient persuadés que la Divinité ne pouvait se mêler des affaires des hommes et, dans le fond, ils n'admettaient aucune divinité », dans *Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1994, vol. 35, pp. 386-387.

ses sentiments, de son cerveau et de son cœur, et cette morale transcende non seulement les frontières, mais aussi les siècles, comme le montre le fait que la beauté d'un geste moral perdure avec le temps. Tout comme chacun sait combien font deux et deux, chacun sait bien au fond de lui-même, une fois parvenu à l'âge de raison, ce qu'il est juste ou injuste de faire. Le scepticisme théorique développé par Voltaire, notamment dans le *Philosophe ignorant*, trouve là sa limitation pratique. Le scepticisme ne vaut donc qu'au service de la tolérance, de la liberté de pensée et d'une certaine idée de la civilisation, et c'est sans doute, sous les traits de Voltaire, ce que la philosophie des Lumières pouvait produire de mieux en matière de scepticisme⁴⁷. Reste que Voltaire sait bien que les progrès de l'espèce humaine au plan moral ne sont en rien définitifs, que la barbarie est toujours aux portes de la civilisation⁴⁸, et que l'histoire n'a pas de sens déterminé – à la gloire du pyrrhonisme.

Alors, que penser de ce scepticisme des Lumières que Popkin jugeait inexistant, à l'exception de Hume, avant d'en faire une référence principale des Lumières ? La lecture que j'ai proposée dans cet article me semble bien illustrer les usages pluriels du scepticisme au XVIII^e siècle, et la difficulté d'en fournir une définition univoque. Si je devais malgré tout résumer de manière schématique la chose, je distinguerais deux formes de scepticisme propres aux Lumières. La première, plus radicale, dominante au XVII^e siècle et dont l'influence perdure au début du XVIII^e siècle, est employée prioritairement pour éviter de faire du cartésianisme le nouvel aristotélisme, c'est-à-dire le nouveau système de pensée réputé indétrônable. La seconde, plus atténuée, plus spécifique à la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle, est principalement utilisée comme méthode pour dépasser nos préjugés et construire collectivement le savoir selon le modèle encyclopédique. Dans ce cadre, et Popkin a bien raison sur

ce point, la pensée de Hume fait figure d'exception au sein des Lumières, comme si le radicalisme sceptique du siècle précédent se perpétuait uniquement à travers lui. Ces deux formes de scepticisme sont assez différentes du scepticisme antique, mais il me semble néanmoins qu'un certain état esprit s'est conservé au fil du temps, qui consiste à penser par soi-même et à se méfier du dogmatisme et des préjugés, comme s'il y avait en fait une sorte de *skepsis perennis* intégrant les deux camps, académicien et pyrrhonien, et permettant de combler le hiatus dont parlait Richard Popkin.

⁴⁷ Ou, pour Kant, de pire : « Voltaire est le sceptique le plus récent de notre époque. Mais son scepticisme est beaucoup plus pernicieux qu'il n'est utile. Il ne donne de raisons, ni pour ni contre, il ne recherche ni n'examine rien, mais il doute, sans aucune preuve, qu'on puisse faire en quelque manière confiance au savoir. Ses raisons ne sont que des pseudo-raisons qui peuvent tromper un homme simple, mais jamais un homme intelligent, réfléchi et savant. Et c'est justement par-là que Voltaire est très dangereux pour la masse et plus particulièrement pour l'homme du commun, car il suggère à celui-ci des raisons entièrement fausses de douter de la vérité de telle ou telle chose ». Cette citation figure dans sa *Logik Blomberg*, (§ 180) telle que rapportée par J. Ferrari, *Les sources françaises de la philosophie de Kant*, Klincksieck, Paris 1980, p. 105.

⁴⁸ Comme le rappelle le final de l'*Éloge historique de la raison*, où la Raison conclut par une adresse à sa fille qui l'incite à la prudence : « Eh bien ! ma chère fille, jouissons de ces beaux jours ; restons ici, s'ils durent ; et, si les orages surviennent, retournons dans notre puits » (*Œuvres de Voltaire*, éd. par Louis Moland, Garnier frères, Paris 1879, vol. 21, p. 522).



Citation: Coppola, A. (2025). Enlightenolatry and the Promotion of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the United States. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 15-21. doi: 10.36253/ds-15759

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Enlightenolatry and the Promotion of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the United States

AL COPPOLA

John Jay College, City University of New York, USA

Abstract. Peter Gay's two-volume study, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation* (1966/69), won the National Book Award in 1966, where its tendentious version of the Enlightenment was embraced as a moderate, hopeful response to the radicalized public sphere of the 1960s. This essay argues that the constellation of ideas celebrated as the "Enlightenment" in Gay's work have provided an enduring template for 21st century Enlightenolatrists like Steven Pinker, whose *Enlightenment Now* (2018) slavishly follows Gay's argument. The persistence of Gay's "undead text," in sense of Daston and Marcus (2019), suggests an additional and troubling dimension to eighteenth-century studies beyond the "wide" and "deep" eighteenth centuries as theorized by Nussbaum (2003) and Roach (2007).

Keywords: Enlightenment, Peter Gay, Steven Pinker, American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Columbia University, campus protests, 1968, public humanities, Columbia University Seminar in Eighteenth-Century European Culture, Undead texts.

I have come to talk about the phenomenon of Steven Pinker, and his soft-headed, politically-soothing conception of the Enlightenment¹. But I need to establish how his form of Enlightenolatry first took root at the very founding of Eighteenth-century studies in the United States. To begin, I must lay my scene at Columbia University in the 1960s: April 23, 1968, to be exact. The college had been brought to a standstill by student protests that would grow to include an estimated 1100 student and community activists. Waves of student unrest convulsed the campus that spring, and the NYPD were called in to forcibly clear the campus of protestors not once but twice. Early morning raids on April 30 and then May 22 led to hundreds of arrests amid shocking scenes of police violence. This is widely known: Columbia was one of the most significant sites of US campus protests in the 60s, but I'd like us to zoom in to find the eighteenth century making a surprising cameo. Direct

¹ This essay was first delivered as a talk at the 16th Congress of the International Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies in Rome, Italy, July 7, 2023. It is drawn from a longer article, A. Coppola, *Enlightenolatry from Peter Gay to Steven Pinker: mass marketing enlightenment and the thick eighteenth century*, «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation», 62, 2021, 3-4, pp. 355-383. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/56/article/906891>>. This talk is reprinted in *Diciottesimo secolo* with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

your eye to window of 202 Low Library one evening shortly after the first occupation began: there you'll see, fluttering across the sash, an incongruous billow of long black robes as a figure bounds up from the turf and into the window of the President's office, where the leadership of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had barricaded themselves.

That figure was Orest Ranum, historian of 17th and 18th century France, a recently tenured Associate Professor and a rising star in the Columbia Seminar in Eighteenth-Century European Culture that had been meeting since 1962. His influential study of the changes in urban life and institutions at the French capitol, *Paris in the Age of Absolutism: An Essay*, had come out that year, and as the director of Columbia's Contemporary Civilization first-year studies program, he cut a distinctive figure on the radicalized campus, teaching classes in full academic regalia. Like many faculty who identified as centrist liberals, he had «scrambled to stop the sit-ins». As Ranum explained in a 2010 interview, «I did that as dramatically as I could: I held over their heads ... the possibility of a counterrevolution at Columbia. Rather than accept a radicalized university, [US] society would snuff out the university»². According to Ranum, he was just attempting to mediate an end to the dispute, and speak up as a voice for moderation and rational, incremental change. However, in return for his kind offices that night Ranum was the target of a shocking revenge. During the May occupation, one of the SDS leaders, J.J. Jacobs, broke into Ranum's office, ransacked his files and set them on fire³.

This much is historical fact. But I can't help but hear symbolic, even mythic, resonances in this story. I find myself reimagining Ranum as a kind of avatar for the Enlightenment itself as it signified in 1968. That is to say, I think of Ranum much in the way Ranum himself treats «Jean», his composite figure of a rural youth coming to Paris to escape poverty, who stars in the stirring, if admittedly artificial, portrait that engrosses the opening pages of Ranum's recently published monograph, *Paris in the age of absolutism: an essay*. And so I have to ask: what is so telling about this entirely tragic story of a renowned Enlightenment scholar, in the full regalia of

his intellectual authority and privileged class position, bounding optimistically through the windows of a revolution whose fires are literally raging all around him? I believe we can learn a great deal about the place of the Enlightenment in public discourse – at the moment of Eighteenth-century studies emergence as an academic field, at the moment of a global convulsion of radical politics – in this Quixotic gambit to reign in the forces of radical revolution with reasoned critique that endorses progress but counsels moderation.

Columbia University, at this moment, was not only one of the most consequential flashpoints of US campus unrest, it was also a key node in the development of Eighteenth-century studies in the American academy. While other historians place its origins with the start *Eighteenth-Century Studies* journal in 1968, or with the group of scholars who returned from the 1967 ISECS congress determined to create an American Society, or even as far back as the founding of the *Johnsonian News Letter* (1940)⁴, the Columbia University Seminar in Eighteenth-Century European Culture played a key role in shaping the course of Eighteenth-century studies in the states. As I will show, the work to emerge from the Seminar was instrumental in shaping the 'enlightenment' as a matter of concern in the wider culture.

Founded in 1962 by faculty members at Columbia⁵, the seminar began as working group to develop what became Peter Gay's two volume study, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, whose first book, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, was published in 1966. Modeled on Samuel Johnson's Club, the group was comprised of scholars drawn from different fields who were recruited for their unique expertise. At the first meeting, Gay delivered a lecture that gave a précis of his argument. The second meeting was devoted entirely to critique and commentary on it. The rest of the sessions for the first couple of years were papers by other seminar members which attempted to refine and extend the intellectual project⁶.

Gay wished to reclaim the Enlightenment as the point of origin for 20th century liberal values by articulating a stadial history of a vivifying and liberating «spirit of criticism» that originated in Greek and Roman

² Quoted in J. Castellucci, *The night they burned Ranum's papers*, «Chronicle of Higher Education», 14 February 2010. See also Cox Commission, *Crisis at Columbia: report of the fact-finding commission appointed to investigate the disturbances at Columbia University in April and May 1968*, Vintage, New York 1968.

³ J. Castellucci, *Ranum's papers*, cit. SDS long denied responsibility, and Castellucci criticizes the credulity of prominent leftists at the time who asserted that the students couldn't possibly have done such a thing and that it must have been the work of the police. The truth came out with the publication of Mark Rudd's memoirs, *Underground: my life with SDS and the Weathermen*, William Morrow, New York 2009.

⁴ D. Greene, *The ASECS's early years: a personal memoir*, in *The past as prologue: essays to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of ASECS*, ed. by C.H. Hay and S.M. Conger, AMS Press, New York 1995, pp. 3-17.

⁵ E. Powers, *Critiquing the enlightenment*, in *A community of scholars: seventy-five years of the university seminars at Columbia*, ed. by T. Vinciguerra, Columbia University Press, New York 2020, pp. 16-29.

⁶ A historical list of papers presented to the Columbia University Seminar in Eighteenth-Century Culture is available on the seminar website, <<https://universityseminars.columbia.edu/seminars/eighteenth-century-european-culture/>>.

antiquity and then reemerged in the Eighteenth century when society «regained its nerve». In his polemical history, a host of forces converged to enable what Gay terms «a little flock of philosophes» to come together and articulate a common, progressive, secular vision for social improvement. These philosophes' «volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science» cohered in a more-or-less unified philosophical and political program that Gay identifies as 'the' Enlightenment – singular, capital 'E' – whose legacy has been unfairly despised and misunderstood:

Ever since the fulminations of Burke and the denunciations of the German Romantics, the Enlightenment has been held responsible for the evils of the modern age, and much scorn has been directed at its supposed superficial rationalism, foolish optimism, and irresponsible Utopianism. Compared to these distortions, more superficial, foolish and irresponsible than the failings they claim to castigate, the amiable caricature drawn by liberal and radical admirers of the Enlightenment has been innocuous: the naivete of the Left has been far outweighed by the malice of the Right⁷.

It's worth unpacking that last formulation: «the naivete of the Left» and the «malice of the Right». Gay was writing at a time before Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of enlightenment* was widely taken up in the American academy; an English translation only appeared in 1969⁸. Few then were willing to consider how Enlightenment rationality might be seen, not as the opponent of, but as a precondition for Fascism and 20th century exploitation capitalism. Thus, the malicious «Right» invoked by Gay is a conflation of 18th century counter-enlightenment traditionalists, as exemplified by Burke, with their apparent 20th century inheritors: the nativists, the religious conservatives, the John Birchers, the autocrats, the strongmen. But it's the «naivete of the Left» that I think is most important here, for Gay's whole project is to fabricate a tendentious, artificially coherent, and deliberately moderate Enlightenment. In Gay's telling, critique incrementally built upon critique across the «three generations» of philosophes to produce a «growing radicalism⁹», but that radicalism had limits: Rousseau must be placed beyond the pale of his «little flock», for example, for being too extreme, too impatient. And that whole French Revolution fiasco – well don't blame our guys. Rather, Gay's soothingly moderate

position is that «The philosophes were simultaneously at peace and at war with their civilization».¹⁰ The Enlightenment was orderly, incremental, efficacious, universal and inevitable.

The problems with this formulation were apparent enough for those that went looking for them at the time. In James Leith's searching 1971 review of Gay's project in *Eighteenth century studies*, he wrote:

Gay's strange weaknesses and peculiar imbalances—... the minimization of the Christian legacy, the expulsion from the orthodox flock those considered too extreme or too crude, ... the exaggeration of the empirical nature of their thought, the overestimation of their cultural relativism, the failure to point out limitations to their toleration, the soft-pedaling of their proposals for manipulating the mind through art or education, ... the refusal even to acknowledge the moral crisis precipitated by the search for autonomy, and the evasion of any consideration of links with the French Revolution—all have a common origin: his determination to show that the philosophes are the source of most that is wholesome in modern western thought¹¹.

This is strong stuff, and I am struck by how proleptic these critiques are. The self-satisfied obliviousness that Leith diagnoses at the heart of Gay's project would prove to be the trigger for and target of an entire generation of scholarship that sought to reckon with the repressed violence, colonial and domestic, that forged and sustains the modern liberal order.

Yet by the time Leith wrote this, Gay had brought the second volume to press, 1969's *The Science of Freedom*, as well as completed a number of ancillary projects: a mass-market 'children's book' on the Enlightenment for the Time/Life «Great ages of man» series, as well as a polemical philosophical dialogue entitled *The bridge of criticism*, where his mouthpiece, Voltaire, debates Lucian and Erasmus to advocate for a fresh application of the methods of the philosophes in the 20th century: «a new span of the bridge of criticism», as Leith puts it, «like the one that Gay believes pagan thinkers once threw across the swamp of belief to progressive Eighteenth-century intellectuals»¹².

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 27

¹¹ J. Leith, *Peter Gay's enlightenment*, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 5, 1971, 1, pp. 157-171: 171.

¹² Leith, *Gay's enlightenment*, cit., p. 170. See P. Gay, *The age of enlightenment*, Time-Life Books, New York 1966; P. Gay, *The enlightenment: an interpretation. The science of freedom*, Knopf, New York 1969 (the second volume of Gay, *Enlightenment/paganism*); and P. Gay, *The bridge of criticism: dialogues among Lucian, Erasmus, and Voltaire on the enlightenment - on history and hope, imagination and reason, constraint and freedom - and on its meaning for our time*, Harper & Row, New York 1970.

⁷ P. Gay, *The enlightenment: an interpretation. The rise of modern paganism*, Knopf, New York 1966, p. ix.

⁸ M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment*, tr. by J. Cumming, Continuum, New York 1969.

⁹ Gay, *Enlightenment/paganism*, cit., p. 17.

Most importantly, by this point Gay's first volume of *The Enlightenment* had won the National Book Award for History and Biography in 1966. Indeed, Gay's distinctive configuration of Enlightenment values and methods struck a profoundly resonant chord in the late 1960s. Not just critically praised in the liberal Establishment press, this book became a popular bestseller that was taken up by book-of-the-month clubs and pushed out to the bed-stands and coffee-tables of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Great Society. By December 1966, it was on *The New York Times*' list of recommended books for the holidays¹³. By January 1967, advertisements for the Book Find Club were touting Gay's *Enlightenment* as one of the featured choices in their «Any 3 Books Free» trial membership promotion. A second book club would advertise it within a month¹⁴. On January 31, Gay's book was shortlisted for the National Book Award¹⁵, and it took the prize at the award ceremony in March 1967. Against the background of the civil rights movement and the metastasizing dispute over the Vietnam War, Gay's book was warmly embraced for its call for the public use of reason and the rosy account of its liberating effect. The jury praised it for having «conducted a brilliant new synthesis of our intellectual heritage from the 18th century» and, echoing the section of Gay's Preface quoted above, for having «successfully defended that heritage from the malice of the Right and the naivete of the Left»¹⁶. As the very words of the prize committee make clear, Gay's work was championed precisely because it seemed to offer hope of a middle way, a moderate but progressive path forward. Here was a guidebook for moderates to navigate the treacherous waters of public discourse as cities erupted in violent race riots that summer, and campuses descended into open revolt, with the rough-beast of revolution slouching along its terrible course, seemingly wherever you looked. One could see how, just one year later, the sensible path of rational, enlightened critique might seem like just the kind of practical advice one might tuck up into the sleeve of one's academic robe before bounding into the lion's den of incipient revolution, seeking to counsel those wild young bloods with a safer, middle way.

¹³ E. Fremont-Smith, *Books of the times: specialist books for specialized generalists*, «New York Times», 16 December 1966, p. 45.

¹⁴ The free book promotion appeared in Display Ad 799, «New York Times», 8 January 1967, p. 293; Gay's book also was featured in the ad for The Readers Subscription book club, Display Ad 903, «New York Times», 19 February 1967, p. 296.

¹⁵ 31 'leading nominees' chosen for the national book awards, «New York Times», 31 January 1967, p. 28.

¹⁶ The National Book Award committee published an excerpt of the 'Citation of the Judges' in a newspaper ad it placed in the *Times* to promote Gay's winning book. Display ad 136, «New York Times», 9 March 1967, p. 37.

As Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown stated in their landmark 1987 collection, *The new eighteenth century*, many of the leading practitioners of Eighteenth century studies continued to that day to «adopt the Eighteenth-century's liberal humanism, empiricism, or Enlightenment ideals[...]as their own commonsensical position without much reflection on the ends for which they are employing these philosophies»¹⁷. Since that volume, there has been a wealth of work that has reassessed our Enlightenment legacies through the study of what Nussbaum later termed a 'wide' Eighteenth century that «resituate[s] Eighteenth-century studies in a spatially and conceptually expanded paradigm»¹⁸. And yet that wealth of rigorous scholarship has barely made a dent in what Annelien de Dijn has called «the iron grip of [Peter Gay's] modernization thesis over our historical imagination»¹⁹. This is acutely the case when we consider how tenaciously this debunked, paste-board Enlightenment retains its hold on the popular historical imagination. Gay's *Enlightenment* is an «Undead Book», to borrow Lorraine Daston and Sharon Marcus' term²⁰, insofar as Gay's book may not be read very much anymore, but its ideology stalks among us still in the works of Steven Pinker.

One need look no further than Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment now: the case for reason, science, humanism and progress*. The Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University is a specialist in cognitive science and psychology, but he has captured an unprecedentedly large platform with books that grapple with the largest-imaginable questions, only to arrive at iconoclastic yet soothing conclusions: On balance, on average, in the grand scheme of history – *when you look at the numbers* – violence is in decline, and we have enlightened modernity to thank for it. As Bill Gates gushes in his jacket blurb—offering what's practically a koan of neoliberal modernity – «the world is getting better, even if it doesn't always feel that way»²¹.

¹⁷ *The new eighteenth century: theory, politics and English literature*, ed. by F. Nussbaum and L. Brown, Methuen, New York 1987, p. 9.

¹⁸ *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. by F. Nussbaum, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2003, p. 1. Cf. particularly S. Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: colonialism and agency, 1688–1804*, Duke University Press, Durham 1999; S. Kaul, *Eighteenth-century British literature and postcolonial studies*, University of Edinburgh Press, Edinburgh 2009; and R. Sudan, *The alchemy of empire: abject materials and the technologies of colonialism*, Fordham University Press, New York 2016.

¹⁹ A. de Dijn, *Politics of enlightenment: from Peter Gay to Jonathan Israel*, «Historical Journal», 55, 2012, 3, pp. 785–805: 786.

²⁰ L. Daston and S. Marcus, *The books that wouldn't die*, «Chronicle of Higher Education», 17 March 2019.

²¹ S. Pinker, *Enlightenment now: the case for reason, science, humanism and progress*, Penguin, New York 2019, unpaginated front matter. Cf. *The White Album*, where Joan Didion recalls a comment dropped in a chance encounter with a proselytizing motel owner as «a more cogent

In *Enlightenment now*, Pinker attempts to take an ostensibly objective and true measure of the state of a whole host of factors affecting to human welfare: life expectancy, sickness and disease, food scarcity and famine, poverty, war, interpersonal violence, legal systems and equality, access to education, and democracy, to give just a partial list. Across the board, and with the help of some seventy graphs that may jog and weave but ultimately trend up – way up! – Pinker inevitably finds reasons to take heart and look on the bright side. While it might be fashionable to grouse that «the institutions of modernity have failed and every aspect of life is in a deepening crisis», Pinker insists that the long arc of history has actually bestowed upon us countless «gifts we take for granted: newborns who will live more than eight decades, markets overflowing with food, clean water that appears with a flick of a finger and waste that disappears with another, pills that erase a painful infection, sons who are not sent off to war, daughters who can walk the streets in safety, critics of the powerful who are not jailed and shot, the world’s knowledge and culture available in a shirt pocket»²². Never mind that not all newborns are born into conditions where they can expect to enjoy eighty laps around the sun, or that abundant food and clean water and a non-poisonous environment are by no means vouchsafed to all in the second decade of the 21st century. Pinker’s book is intended to be a reproach to «an obliviousness to the scope of human progress». In Pinker’s gospel, suffering and inequality are at historic lows, and the apostles of light are optimizing all the time. Best to get with the program and view «the world’s problems against a background of progress that it seeks to build upon by solving those problems in their turn»²³.

That program, of course, is the Enlightenment. Actually, it’s best to put what Pinker has in mind in air-quotes, because Pinker’s ‘Enlightenment’ is as airy and ideological a construction as you care to find. Pinker’s definition of the Enlightenment itself is mobile, but clearly has to do with the power of ‘reason’, ‘science’ and ‘humanism’ to secure ‘progress.’ A seven and a half page chapter entitled “Dare to Understand” – riffing, of course, on Immanuel Kant’s famous essay in response to the question, *What is Enlightenment?* – quotes the physicist David Deutsch, the historian David Wootton,

question than it might at first appear, a kind of koan of the period». For Didion, the late 1960s’ solipsism and denial was precisely encapsulated in the statement, *If you can’t believe you are going to heaven in your own body and on a first-name basis with all the members of your family, then what’s the point of dying?* J. Didion, *The white album*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 2009, p. 46.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 4-5.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

the sociologist Robert Scott, and the political scientist James Scott, as well as offers bon mots and maxims, *passim*, from Kant, Montesquieu, and the economist Ludwig von Mises. Pinker name-checks Spinoza, Hobbes, Hume, Condorcet, Diderot, D’Alembert, Rousseau, Vico, Beccaria, Voltaire, Saint-Pierre, Washington, Madison, and Hamilton, but, aside from Kant, only Adam Smith merits more than the invocation of a bare name²⁴. Indeed, if nuanced historical analysis is lacking, if a detailed engagement with the complicated and ambiguous texts that the actual *philosophes* wrote is absent here, we can hardly blame Pinker, because that is by design. For his objective is to simply champion an ideology: «In fact, it’s the ideals of reason, science, and humanism that I’m endorsing, and I use ‘the Enlightenment’ as a handy rubric for that set of ideals (since their most vehement and enduring expression can be found in that era)²⁵».

Pinker claims that he is producing no simple-minded book of «Enlightenolatry» – his word, mind you – because, hey, «some were racists, sexists, anti-Semites slaveholders or duelists». Their shortcomings are just evidence that they were «born too soon to appreciate some of the keystones of our modern understanding²⁶», but that mighty engine of infallible progress, Enlightenment-with-a-capital-E, is their great legacy. What gets pasted together from a tendentious selection of quotations from the breezy parade of secondary sources in his twenty footnotes – is a two-dimensional Light-of-Reason-Emerging-from-Darkness narrative in the «iron grip» of de Dijn’s modernization thesis that’s lifted straight from the playbook of Peter Gay²⁷.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 7-14.

²⁵ Steven Pinker: *counter-enlightenment convictions are ‘surprisingly resilient’*, «Quillette», 20 April 2018, <<https://quillette.com/2018/04/20/steven-pinker-counter-enlightenment-convictions-surprisingly-resilient/>>.

²⁶ Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 14. I take the term ‘Enlightenolatry’ from Pinker himself, who claims that the ideological advocacy of a historically-inaccurate buzzword is precisely not what he is up to in his book. I beg to differ.

²⁷ de Dijn, *Politics of enlightenment*, cit., p. 786. There are 29 sources cited in Pinker’s crucial first chapter, where he lays out the intellectual foundation of his project, yet less than half are from university presses. The example of D. Wootton, *The Invention of Science: A New History of the Scientific Revolution*, Penguin, London 2015, is instructive: Wootton’s non-peer-reviewed popular history of science attempts to roll back a generation of research into the social construction of scientific knowledge and the impact that material, artisanal and cultural practices had on the making of scientific facts. John Henry’s review essay in *Isis* takes issue with Wootton’s focus on vindicating the reality of scientific discoveries, and his assertion that science advances from one true discovery to the next, concluding the book exhibits an «aura of whiggishness, or even of teleology». Wootton’s «belief in the importance of discovery, and the way culminating discoveries lead to progress» lead him to «self-serving» «dismissals» of prominent relativist philosophical and sociological approaches. J. Henry, *The scientific revolution: five books about it*, «Isis», 107, 2016, 4, pp. 809-817.

Like Gay, Pinker's first principles of Enlightenment begin with an embrace of Reason and flight from Superstition that is ascribed to the triumph of a secular worldview. As he marshals his forces in 'Dare to Understand', the crucial first chapter that lays out the Enlightenment ideals that provide the intellectual grounds for his argument, he begins by championing secular rationalism: «If there is anything the Enlightenment thinkers had in common, it was an insistence that we [...] not fall back generators of delusion like faith, dogma, revelations, authority, charisma, mysticism, divination, visions, gut feelings, or the hermeneutic parsing of sacred texts²⁸». Never mind that the notion of a wholly secular Enlightenment has been thoroughly debunked²⁹, much less the notion that there was a single Enlightenment in the first place³⁰: no complexities and ambiguities will disturb this ideological purity. The liberating effect of a radical secularism is, of course, a bedrock precept for Gay as well, central to the argument of his great work but – perhaps more tellingly – the focus of an entire chapter in his Time/Life volume, *The age of Enlightenment*³¹. Indeed, a closer look at the structure of Pinker's argument in *Enlightenment now* indicates a surprising reality: it follows Gay's *Age of Enlightenment* in near lock-step, as if Pinker borrowed the *inventio* and *dispositio* of his argument from the pop-intellectual picture book of the mid-century scholar.

For example, Pinker goes on to explain that his second ideal is «science», which he warrants with reference to Wootton's teleological and presentist sketch of the sup-

posed absurdities that an «educated Englishman» would have believed in 1600 and that would have been swept aside by the triumphant progress of science: «he believes that a murdered body will bleed in the presence of a murderer ... he believes that the shape, colour and texture of a plant can be a clue to how it will work as a medicine». Never mind that the long history of empiricism is replete with now discredited ideas that carried epistemological value at the time, and that those ideas and practices had a formative influence on the now-accepted science that followed³². Never mind that the field of science studies has demonstrated that knowledge production is necessarily contingent, emergent and socially-constructed, and never inevitable³³. To be fair, before any of these developments in the history, sociology and philosophy of science had gained traction, Gay also began his book with science – chapter one of *The age of Enlightenment* was entitled *The Practical Philosophers* – but there he actually gives a more nuanced explanation of the force of the new science through an admittedly hagiographic account of Isaac Newton, which casts him in that familiar role of stringent empiricist who transformed natural inquiry by refusing to frame/feign hypotheses³⁴. But like Gay, after his peon to the liberating powers of scientific progress, Pinker goes on to claim that the next pillar of Enlightenment was the rise of a «science of man» which sought to apply the tools of empiricism to the minds, hearts and actions of men³⁵. (Gay's third chapter is *In Search of the Ideal Society*, and his fifth covers *The Science of Man*).

After praising the *philosophes* for «their belief that there was such a thing as universal human nature, and that it could be studied scientifically» – «they were cognitive neuroscientists ... they were evolutionary psychologists ... they were cultural anthropologists»³⁶ – Pinker

²⁸ Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 8.

²⁹ Cf. M. Portuondo, *The Spanish disquiet: the biblical natural philosophy of Benito Arias Montano*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2019. Even Jonathan Israel, the most prominent exponent of a grand unifying narrative of the Enlightenment today, distinguishes a core Spinozist Radical Enlightenment from the moderate, Deistic Enlightenment of figures like Montesquieu, Voltaire and Locke in his three-part revision of Gay, *Radical enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity, 1650–1750*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; *Enlightenment contested: philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man, 1670–1752*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006; and *Democratic enlightenment: philosophy, revolution, and human rights 1750–1790*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

³⁰ Cf. J.G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism & Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and especially the proceedings from a symposium held at the CUNY Graduate Center that featured both Pocock and Israel. As Israel phrased it in his remarks, Pocock seeks «to convince us that [the Enlightenment] occurred in “too many forms to be comprised within a single definition and history, and that we do better to think of a family of enlightenments”» as opposed to «a common transatlantic phenomenon that in some sense made the world anew». J. Israel, J. G. A. Pocock and the «Language of Enlightenment» in his «Barbarism and Religion», «Journal of the History of Ideas», 77, 2016, 1, pp. 107–127: 107 e 109.

³¹ Chapter two of Gay, *Age of enlightenment*, *supra*, is entitled *A religion of rationality*. This illustrated popular history was produced as part of *The Great Ages of Man* series, edited by Russell Bourne.

³² Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 9, citing D. Wootton, *Invention of Science*, cit.. Cf., for example, L. M. Principe, *The secrets of alchemy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012.

³³ Cf. particularly S. Shapin and S. Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the experimental life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1985; B. Latour, *Science in action: how to follow scientists and engineers through society*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1987; I. Hacking, *The social construction of what?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000; J. Golinski, *Making natural knowledge: constructivism and the history of science* University Press of Chicago, Cambridge 2005; and K. Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham 2007. Indeed, the whole notion of 'progress' in the sciences has been unmasked as an ideological delusion. Cf. particularly B. Latour, *We have never been modern*, Engl. transl. by C. Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1993; and D. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016.

³⁴ Cf. Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., pp. 9–10, to Gay, *Age of enlightenment*, cit., pp. 1–29.

³⁵ Cf. Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 10, to Gay, *Age of enlightenment*, cit., pp. 52–64 and pp. 100–110.

³⁶ Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 10.

asserts that the third pillar of Enlightenment is the rise of «humanism» (Gay, avoiding Pinker's puzzling anachronism, writes in his chapter four about a *Vogue for Sentimentality*³⁷). Pinker assures his readers that «a humanistic sensibility impelled the Enlightenment thinkers to condemn not just religious violence but also the secular cruelties of their age, including slavery, despotism, executions for frivolous expenses such as shoplifting and poaching, and sadistic punishments». Indeed, he asserts that «the Enlightenment is sometimes called the Humanitarian Revolution, because it led to the abolition of barbaric practices that had been commonplace across civilizations for millennia»³⁸. In this rose-tinted history, Pinker doesn't just get his facts wrong: plenty of Enlightenment figures actively supported slavery and other depredations. Pinker in fact sounds rather like Gay when he chillingly assures his young readers in *The Age of Enlightenment* that «the Industrial Revolution was also immensely beneficial. New factories brought employment to areas long sunk in economic stagnation. And the new machines, as brutalizing as they were, did give regular work to many laborers who had only been casually or occasionally employed. These were only the immediate, obvious benefits»³⁹.

I won't have time today to review the astonishing symmetry between Pinker's 2019 bestseller and Gay's 1966 children's book, but I review the detailed points of overlap in the full version of this talk, which was published in 2021 in volume 62 of the American journal, «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation»⁴⁰. My point is, that this infantilizing approach is very much by design. Ultimately, Pinker's book sells because it offers salve to those with enough comfort and privilege to be able to believe that no one has any real grounds to complain about their lot, and that everything will work out fine in the end. In short, Pinker is being lionized because he is providing what Stuart Carroll, writing about Pinker's 2011 book on violence, has termed «Comfort History»⁴¹.

I can think of no better way of ending this essay than to play this prominent 2019 example of comfort history against the work that effectively established the

genre. For Gay, writing in 1966, it was the leftists of his day, not the conservatives, who stood accused of soft-headed Enlightenolatry: then, his scorn was reserved for the «Naivete of the Left». Nevertheless, Gay's formulation of those critics' shortcomings seems to take the exact measure of Pinker's project, and the naivete of his followers on the Twenty-first-century Right, whether they be reactionary conservatives or libertarian technocrats, driven by «superficial rationalism», «foolish optimism», or «irresponsible Utopianism»⁴². Whichever handle you pick it up with, the essence of the appeal – whether in Pinker's America or Gay's America – is that it allows the champions of Enlightenment to stake out a position as the «encircled, non-ideological defender of the vital center»⁴³. The palliative care of comfort history is an old Enlightenment family recipe.

³⁷ Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., pp. 10-11, to Gay, *Age of enlightenment*, cit., pp. 76-86.

³⁸ Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 11, citing, passim, L. Hunt, *Inventing human rights: a history*, Norton, New York 2007, and S. Pinker, *The better angels of our nature*, Viking, New York 2011.

³⁹ Gay, *Age of enlightenment*, cit., p. 108.

⁴⁰ A. Coppola, *Enlightenolatry from Peter Gay to Steven Pinker: mass marketing enlightenment and the thick eighteenth century*, «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation», 62, 2021, 3-4, pp. 355-383. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/56/article/906891>>.

⁴¹ S. Carroll, *Thinking with violence*, «History and Theory», 55, 2017, pp. 23-43: 24.

⁴² Gay, *Enlightenment/paganism*, cit., p. ix.

⁴³ W. Epstein, *Counter-intelligence: cold-war criticism and eighteenth-century studies*, «ELH», 57, 1990, 1, pp. 63-99: 76.



Citation: De Francesco, A. (2025). An Etruscan empire in the Mediterranean world. Antiquities, cultural models and national identities in 18th-century Italy. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 23-32. doi: 10.36253/ds-15562

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

An Etruscan empire in the Mediterranean world. Antiquities, cultural models and national identities in 18th-century Italy

ANTONINO DE FRANCESCO

Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Abstract. The essay revisits the figure of the Scotsman James Byres, son of a Jacobite at the exiled court of the Stuart pretender, who gained renown in Rome as a *cicerone* for English travelers in Italy. In particular, the study sheds new light on the journey undertaken in 1767 with Roger Wilbraham to southern Italy. Rather than being a traditional educational tour, this itinerary sought to substantiate the hypotheses of Tuscan antiquarians, which proposed the existence of an Etruscan empire spanning the entire Mediterranean before its memory was obscured by the ascendancy of Rome. Byres aimed to demonstrate the existence of an Etruscan civilization that served as the foundation of ancient Roman culture. However, the triumph of Winckelmann – who regarded Etruscan studies with disdain – marked the end of this alternative interpretation of antiquity. Consequently, the myth of an Etruscan Italy was subsumed within the nationalist discourse of the early 19th century.

Keywords: Byres James, Wilbraham Roger, Grand Tour, Southern Italy, Etruscan Antiquarianism.

In the mid 18th century, Southern Italy became a favourite destination for European travellers. Their interest stemmed from the idea that it was a magical place, locked in its own past, where one could rediscover a marvellous world that was lost elsewhere. Travellers from all over Europe were still stopping in Florence and Rome, but by now – attracted by the ruins of Pompeii – they were also going beyond Naples to Sicily. The Greco-Roman vestiges were an important attraction, but did not by themselves justify such a demanding journey. The tourist guides of the time suggest that the image of a southern Italy portrayed in dark colours and made fascinating by its social backwardness also played an important role. In this case, anthropology prevailed over antiquity, even if there was almost nothing authentic in this search for a different world, different in large respects from Europe¹. In any case, the journey was an obligatory stage for the elites of Europe: knowledge of the arts, history, geography and antiquity was considered necessary so that, back home, these

¹ See in this specific regard of the Grand Tour, A. De Francesco, *La palla al piede. Una storia del pregiudizio antimeridionale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2012, esp. pp. 27-34.

men could exercise the political and cultural primacy that their social status assigned them².

One example among many that could be given concerns the brothers George (b. 1741) and Roger (b. 1743) Wilbraham, of an old English noble lineage. Both entered Trinity College, Cambridge, and travelled to Italy – soon after receiving their *bachelor's* degree³. The oldest brother was in Rome at the end of 1764 before travelling to Greece and Asia Minor and then coming back to Italy. The younger too arrived in the Eternal City, around 1766, where – like previously his brother – he was accompanied on a tour of the city by James Byres, a Scottish Jacobite architect and antiquarian enthusiast, who alternated between selling art objects and acting as a cicerone for Britons passing through the city⁴. At any rate, Roger was probably the Wilbraham who accompanied James Byres on a tour through southern Italy and Sicily, which started in mid-March 1766 and ended around July⁵.

As I will try to demonstrate, the journey of the two was, however, very different from all the others Byres' travels⁶. When Roger Wilbraham returned to England,

he opened up for him a wealthy life, one that he was destined to spend in literary idleness, but also to cross paths with politics. Indeed, he came to it reluctantly and late, in 1786, when he was elected MP for the constituency of Helston and then from 1790 for that of Bodmin, both in Cornwall. He remained in parliament until 1796.⁷ In those years – soon dominated by the French Revolution – he was at first a supporter of Fox against Pitt's policy of all-out war on France. For this reason, fearing he would lose his seat, he tried to rejoin the government. In 1794 he attempted to gain the support of the Duke of Portland, but the latter – who had broken with the Whigs and joined Pitt's majority – refused to help him. Subsequently, he ended up losing his seat in 1796.

Thus, the Napoleonic Wars would return him to the mere pleasure of studies: he was a member of numerous academies, including the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries, a linguistics enthusiast and always cultivated a deep interest in Italy. He owned one of the best Italian-language libraries in the United Kingdom, specialising in 16th and 17th century authors⁸. His passion for Italian literature brought him into contact with Ugo Foscolo, who frequented him during his exile in London⁹. In 1817, Wilbraham wrote him these elegant words in Italian:

avete avuto sempre la bontà di sciogliere moltissimi miei dubbi e di correggere parecchi errori particolarmente riguardanti la lingua e la letteratura del vostro bel paese¹⁰.

These words speak of the importance of Roger Wilbraham's youthful journey to Italy and allow us to remember the man who played an important role in his formation. James Byres is not new to scholarly interest¹¹: he was born in 1733 in Aberdeen, the son of a Scottish

² R. Sweet, *Cities and the Grand Tour. The British in Italy, ca. 1680-1820*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 23-64.

³ See for a brief biography, «Journal of the Architectural, Archaeological and Historic Society for the County, City and Neighbourhood of Chester», For the Members of the Society, Chester, 1864, pp. 61-62.

⁴ See e.g. the account of the artistic purchases made in Italy by Charles Burney: «The first embarkation of books etc. I made, was at Venice under the care of our resident Mr Richie – at Florence my collection grew unwealdy again and I sent off another Chest, by way of Leghorn, addressed to Molini – at Rome and Naples my acquisitions in books, prints & drawings were very great – of these a large chest was made up and consigned to the care of the worthy Mr Byers, one of the best antiquaries and honestest men at Rome...» (Charles Burney to Samuel Crisp, Calais, December 1770, in A. Ribeiro [ed.], *The Letters of Charles Burney, 1751-1784*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991, p. 1770). See also the notes written by John Moore: «Our mornings are generally spent in visiting the antiquities, and the paintings in the palaces. On those occasions we are accompanied by Mr. Byres» (*A View of Society and Manners in Italy: with Anecdotes Relating to some Eminent Characters*, A. Strahan and T. Cadell, London 1790⁵, vol. I, p. 383).

⁵ There are uncertainties as to which of the two brothers was with Byres in southern Italy. H. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*, Murray, London 1978, p. 178 suggests that it was Roger, while J. Ingamells (ed.), *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1997, p. 998, believes it was George.

⁶ Indeed, Byres used to act as a guide of wealthy travellers to Naples and Sicily. See in this regard the words of Lord Hamilton, British ambassador to Naples, written in September 1781: «There are two persons, however, that attended Lord Richard several months, & were certainly very necessary to His Lordship, & both of whom I am certain Ld Richard intended to reward most handsomely. The first is Mr. Byres, the Architect, who, after having attended Ld Richard two months at Rome, came here by His Lordship's desire, went the Tour of Sicily with him, having made his journey from Rome & back again at his own expence, Ld Richard having told Mr. Tierney that he meant to satisfy Byres at his return to Rome», in A. Morrison (ed.), *Hamilton and Nelson Papers*,

Printed for private circulation, [London] 1893, vol. I, p. 75.

⁷ R.J. Thorne (ed.), *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons, 1780-1820*, Sicker & Warburg, London 1986, p. 576.

⁸ «The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle», 1829, p. 569.

⁹ See on this topic N. Havely, «*This Infernal Essay*»: *English Contexts for Foscolo's «Essay on the Present Literature of Italy»*, in L.M. Crisafulli (ed.), *Immaginando l'Italia. Itinerari letterari del Romanticismo inglese*, Clueb, Bologna, 2002, pp. 233-250, and L.M. Crisafulli, «*An infernal triangle*»: Foscolo, *Hobhouse, Di Breme and the Italian context of the «Essay on the Present Literature of Italy»*, *ivi*, pp. 251-285.

¹⁰ E.R.P. Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo. An Italian in Regency England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1953, pp. 63-66.

¹¹ See, among the others: B. Ford, *James Byres, principal antiquarian to the English visitors to Rome, «Apollo»*, 8, 1974, pp. 446-461; H.G. Slade, *James Byres of Tonley (1734-1817): the Architecture of a Scottish Cicerone*, «*Architectural Heritage*», 2, 1991, pp. 18-28; P. Coen, *La carriera di mercante d'arte e il profilo culturale di James Byres of Tonley (1737-1824)*, «*Roma moderna e contemporanea*», 10, 2002, pp. 153-178; e D. Ridgway, *James Byres and the Definition of the Etruscans*, in J. Swaddling and P. Perkins (eds.), *Etruscan by definition. Papers in honour of Sybille Haines*, British Museum, London 2009, pp. 2-8.

Catholic aristocrat who, following the defeat of the Stuart pretender at Culloden, had taken him with him to France¹². James had then returned to Scotland to save the family properties that were in danger of being confiscated, but in 1756 (or 1758) had then joined his family who had followed James III Stuart to Rome.

In the Eternal City, the Pretender had established a small exiled court, which enjoyed the financial support of the kings of France and of the Papacy¹³. The defeat at Culloden, however, destroyed any hope that the Stuarts would ever be restored and James III realised that the exile would never come to an end. The Pretender, nevertheless, still managed to maintain a privileged status until his death in early 1766 and the court remained an attraction for the many Britons travelling to Italy¹⁴. Afterwards, it was a disaster: his son Charles, with whom James III had broken off long before, was not recognised by the Pope as the Pretender to the British Crown and the financial support of France and Spain was drastically reduced¹⁵. At the beginning of 1767, Andrew Lumisden wrote repeatedly about the severe difficulties of the Pretender:

Of Her Majesty affairs I can, alas, say nothing agreeable to you. They remain in the same dismal situation. It is indeed reasonable to think that the Court of France, for their own interest, will not abandon a family who has often been and may still be of real advantage to them. However, the many and strong representations made to that Court have hitherto produced no effect. The French ministers are so intimidated with the present power of England that they seem even afraid to hear of any scheme that may tend to their own security. May they soon use their essor [...] may enable him to live with some decency...¹⁶.

However, things could only get worse: without the indispensable financial independence, there could no longer be any question of his Court offering benefits to those who had previously followed the Stuarts into exile. For these courtisana, a new life opened up, and it is no

coincidence that the following years saw Byres' trade as an art dealer rise. In the role of Cicerone, however, he made good money, because his guided tours became enormously fashionable for British people passing through Rome¹⁷. It seems that he charged three times as much as other guides, but he added to his earnings from the sale of art objects to his clients¹⁸.

Opinions about his work – as always – were divided. Some complained of verbosity and pedantry, but others appreciated his competence. Among the latter was, for example, Edward Gibbon, who in his memoirs recalls days spent visiting monuments with James Byres, «a Scotch antiquary of experience and taste» who did not always listen. In fact, «in the daily labour of 18 weeks the powers of attention were sometimes fatigued» and he preferred to continue visiting the city alone¹⁹. But this is Gibbon we are talking about, and so – with all due proportion to all the others, often lacking a specific knowledge of the ancient world – Byres at the time passed for a tutelary deity in the study of antiquity.

He wanted to conquer a space in antiquarianism²⁰ and his attention soon turned to the Etruscan world. The season seemed propitious, because the publication of *De Etruria regali* by the Scotsman Thomas Dempster, published posthumously in Florence in 1723-24, had launched the fortunes of Etruscan scholarship²¹. Above all, the discovery of the tombs of Corneto, today's Tarquinia, had aroused great interest. Anton Francesco Gori published the *Museum Etruscum* in 1737, which was soon harshly criticised by Scipione Maffei's *Della nazione etrusca* (1739), but the violent controversy made the site a place of great attraction²². Winckelmann visited it many years later, in 1758, followed in 1761 by Thomas

¹² *The Byres Family: An Eighteenth Century Portrait Group*, «The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs», 82, 1943, 479, pp. 46-49.

¹³ See E. Corp, *The Stuarts in Italy, 1719-1766. A Royal Court in permanent Exile*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 345-349.

¹⁴ All this is confirmed by the solemn funeral reserved by the pope for James III. See *Relazione della infermità, morte, solenni esequie e trasporto di Sua Maestà Giacomo III Re della Gran Britannia*, per il Sassi successore del Benacci, in Roma e in Bologna s.a. [1766].

¹⁵ See Lumisden's letter to Mr. Robertson, Jan. 27, 1767: «There is alas no alteration on the disagreeable situation of the king's affairs; he remains here deprived in a manner of all society. Nor have the courts of France or Spain hitherto done the smallest thing for his relief», National Library of Scotland (= NLS), Ms. 14261: *Andrew Lumisden letters*, 1767.

¹⁶ Ivi, letter to captain William Stuart, Jan. 6, 1767.

¹⁷ In 1780 the Welsh painter Thomas Jones wrote that Byres was «the principal antiquarian to the English, or person who attended strangers to show and explain the various buildings both modern and ancient, statues and pictures and other curiosities in this city and its environs»; see *Memoirs of Thomas Jones: Penkerrig Radnorshire 1803*, «The Volume of the Walpole Society», 32, 1946-48, p. 94.

¹⁸ See Ingamells (ed.), *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy*, cit., p. XLV; e Sweet, *Cities and the Grand Tour*, cit., p. 10.

¹⁹ See *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq. with Memoirs of His Life and Writings*, Composed by Himself, Murray, London 1814, vol. I, p. 196. See also J.D. Prown, *A Course of Antiquities at Rome, 1764*, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 31, 1997, pp. 90-100.

²⁰ P. Davidson, *James Byres of Tonley. Jacobites and Etruscans*, «Recusant History», 30, 2010, pp. 261-274.

²¹ M. Cristofani, *Sugli inizi dell'etruscheria. La pubblicazione del De Etruria regali di Thomas Dempster*, «Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Antiquité», 90, 1978, vol. II, pp. 577-625. See also F. Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment. Livornese Jews, Tuscan Culture and Eighteenth-Century Reform*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, p. 91.

²² On this aspect, M. Cristofani, *La scoperta degli etruschi. Archeologia e antiquaria nel '700*, Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche, Roma 1983. See also G.M. Della Fina, *History of Etruscology*, in A. Naso (ed.), *Etruscology*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2017, vol. I, pp. 57-71.

Jenkins, who launched a successful excavation campaign and gave an account of it in the Roman academies²³. In 1765 Giambattista Piranesi was in Corneto and returned there again the following year: this time he was with James Byres, Wilbraham and the Polish painter Franciszek Smuglewicz, whom Byres had asked to make drawings of the tombs²⁴.

The small expedition probably had different plans. Piranesi was at the time in controversy with the French scholar Mariette, who in 1764 had rejected his thesis about the existence of an indigenous Roman architecture, because the presence of very ancient and impressive structures in Italy did not prove the artistic abilities of the Romans, since they were built by the Etruscans (who, Mariette assumed, were also Greek in origin)²⁵. Instead, Byres and his people were worried by the resourcefulness of Jenkins, a businessman with a passion for antiquarianism, who was suspected of spying for the London government at the court of the Stuart Pretender²⁶. It does not seem that Byres, though a Catholic and Jacobite, cared about Jenkins' political profile. Instead, he was concerned that Jenkins' excellent relations with politics would favour him in writing a history of the Etruscans for English-language readers. A letter from Byres to William Hamilton, British ambassador in Naples, but also a great antiquarian, illuminates his intentions.

In short, Byres wanted to write a *History of the Etruscans and their Antiquities*, because he was sure

that archaeological sites and antiquarian studies would allow the Etruscan problem to be tackled in a new way. According to Timothy Mowl, «in 1767 Byres's Etruscans would have had no competition and would have been hailed as a revelation»²⁷. All this is questionable, but there is no doubt that it was Byres' hope.

In any case, however, the letter to Hamilton is also important from a chronological point of view, as it was written immediately after the conclusion of the journey he made to southern Italy with Wilbraham. The journey was therefore not intended to simply accompany the young aristocrat on his Grand Tour, but was considered by Byres as a decisive step towards writing the history of the Etruscans. In confirmation of this reading of Byres and Wilbraham's journey we have Winckelmann's words. He was at the time superintendent of antiquities in Rome, knew Byres, but had no sympathy for him because he considered him an improvised scholar. In 1767, he drew a harsh portrait of Byres in a letter to the Prussian baron Johann Hermann von Riedesel, who himself had just returned from a trip to southern Italy:

Byres and his companion did not – I am told – encounter the same hospitality [than you], but I understand it. For, such a hypochondriac, fearful and deranged being would certainly not give me the idea of offering him my home and my table; like all Britons, he will retain an aversion to this nation²⁸.

In short, Winckelmann despised the arrogance with which the British arrived in Italy and showed a condescending attitude towards its inhabitants. However, in the case of Byres, his disdain went even further: it was not only the human profile that disturbed him, but also the cultural dilettantism. In an earlier letter, written to his friend Yves Marie Desmarests on 14 July 1766, Winckelmann refers to the journey that Byres and Wilbraham had just made and expresses a condescending judgement towards them.

Un Anglois que vous avez connu ici, nommé Villebrain, a fait le voyage de la Sicile, accompagné d'un habile architecte écossais, M. Byres. Ces deux voyageurs n'ont eu en vue que les antiquités qu'il ont recherchées avec soin à Corneto dans le pays des anciens Tarquiniens: ils ont pénétré dans l'intérieur du pays pour rechercher les vestiges de l'ancienne Enna, mais ils n'ont trouvé qu'une tour carrée bâtie par les Sarrasins²⁹.

²³ On the career of Thomas Jenkins, see S.R. Pierce, *Thomas Jenkins in Rome*, «The Antiquaries Journal», 45, 1965, pp. 200-229; B. Ford, *Thomas Jenkins: banker, dealer and unofficial English agent*, «Apollo», 99, 1974, pp. 416-425; A. Cesareo, *He had for years the guidance of the taste in Rome*, in E. Debenedetti (ed.), *Collezionisti, Disegnatori e Teorici dal Barocco al Neoclassico*, Bonsignori, Roma 2009, pp. 221-250; I. Bignamini and C. Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing in Eighteenth-Century Rome*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2010, vol. I, pp. 209-221.

²⁴ See Piranesi's praise for Byres: «Più d'ogni altro però sono da aversi in pregio le grotte cornetane, grotte cognite oramai da una parte di antiquari e professori delle belle arti e tra questi all'eruditissimo signor Jacopo Byres, architetto e antiquario scozzese, che sta per pubblicarne i disegni in una raccolta in cui mostrerà la sua non volgare perizia nell'uno e nell'altro genere» (G.B. Piranesi, *Diverse maniere d'adornare i cammini ed ogni altra parte degli edifizj desunte dall'architettura egizia, etrusca, e greca con un Ragionamento apologetico in difesa dell'architettura egizia, e toscana*, Salomoni, Roma 1769, p. 22).

²⁵ Osservazioni di Gio. Batista Piranesi sopra la Lettre de M. Mariette aux auteurs de la Gazette de l'Europe: inserita nel supplemento dell'istessa gazzetta stampata Dimanche 4, Novembre MDCCLIV [i.e. 1764] & Parere su l'architettura, con una prefazione ad un nuovo trattato della introduzione e del progresso delle belle arti in Europa ne' tempi antichi, Salomoni, Roma 1765.

²⁶ «... in 1760 the Jacobite Andrew Lumisden described him as having "long been known here for his villainies. However, by consummate impudence, joined to the honourable office of a spy, he gets himself commended to many of the English travellers"» (see Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy*, cit., p. 554).

²⁷ T. Mowl, *A Roman Palace for a Welsh Prince, Byres' designs for Sir Watkyn Williams-Wynn*, «Apollo», 120, 1995, pp. 33-41.

²⁸ G.G. Winckelmann, *Opere*, Fratelli Giachetti, Prato 1834, vol. X, p. 322.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 233.

This letter is known and has been quoted by Brinsley Ford, but it does not seem to me that he has read it in the most appropriate way³⁰. In fact, Winckelmann's words not only confirm that the trip to Sicily followed the research conducted in Corneto, but also say that Byres and Wilbraham had gone to the island to find a clear trace of the presence of Etruscan people there.

This is an important point, because it indicates that Byres was embracing the theses on Etruscan antiquity that were widespread at the time. Much has been written on this aspect and it would be useless to dwell on it in detail. Here, it is important to recall that the interest in the Etruscans had begun in the years of Gastone de' Medici and was aimed at exalting the indigenous values of Tuscany. Then, Etruscanism had accompanied the claim of the new Lorraine dynasty to play a prominent role in the whole peninsula³¹. The identity use of the Etruscan past is confirmed by the prelate Mario Guarnacci, who between 1767 and 1772 published a work, with a significant title: *Origini italiane o siano Memorie storico-etrusche sopra l'antichissimo Regno d'Italia, e sopra i di lei primi abitatori nei secoli più remoti*³². The title is revealing of the idea that Tuscany was at the origin of Italy, because it had been inhabited since very its ancient times by a people that had dominated the entire peninsula, had pushed into the Mediterranean and had given civilisation even to Greece itself. The Romans, however, had destroyed it and voluntarily erased its memory because they did not want to recognise that their civilisation was actually Etruscan. Guarnacci's intentions were clear: on the one hand, by insisting on the antiquity of Tuscany, he wanted to reaffirm its cultural primacy in the whole of Italy, but on the other hand, by emphasising the Etruscan origins of civilisation, he distanced himself from Winckelmann's neoclassicism and proposed another way to the genesis of civilisation³³.

Byres was fascinated by Guarnacci's reconstruction, which had long been circulating in the cultural circles of mid-eighteenth-century Rome³⁴. We know that he had commissioned a summary of Guarnacci's work, the title of which is itself revealing: *Reasons and authorities that*

prove that before the Roman Republic, the empire of the Etruscans extended throughout Italy and beyond. He then followed this trail when he began writing his work on the Etruscans: in the few pages that remain Byres says that Africa and Europe were once united, that the Mediterranean had originated from great telluric movements and that the Etruscans had dominated the entire Mediterranean world before the Romans erased them from history³⁵.

These pages, written after the trip to southern Italy in the company of Wilbraham, offer the possibility of reading the notes taken by Byres for the occasion³⁶ in a different way. Brinsley Ford and David Ridgway have already mentioned them³⁷, but I believe a few more considerations can be added. Firstly, let us recall that the voyage went from Rome to Agrigento passing also through Malta and Gozo, but its continuation is not known, because the notebook breaks off on the description of the remains of Agrigento. In any case, the travel notes do not summarise a route in the footsteps of classical antiquity, because after the obligatory stops at Pompeii, after being a precursor of a tour around Paestum, the two visited a number of places that were not part of the Grand Tour route. As the map shows, Byres and Wilbraham were in Sicignano degli Alburni, Polla, Lagonegro, Lauria, Cosenza, Rogliano, Monteleone, Seminara, Mileto and Nicotera. From there they reached the southern Calabria and stayed in Bagnara, Scilla and Reggio. But the journey developed mainly in eastern Sicily: the two visited Scaletta Zanclea, Roccalumera, Savoca, Forza d'Agrò Sant'Alessio Siculo, Taormina, Giardini, Giarre, Mascali, Acireale, Catania, Nicolosi, Lentini, Augusta, Syracuse, Avola, Noto, Pachino to reach Capo Passero, from where they embarked for the island of Malta, then on to Gozo and from there to Agrigento.

In the course of the journey, Byres paid particular attention to volcanic activity: he only admired Stromboli from afar³⁸, but described the eruptive activity of Vesuvius³⁹ and made an excursion to Mount Etna in the after-

³⁰ Ford, *James Byres*, cit., p. 452.

³¹ M. Verga, *Dai Medici ai Lorena. Politica e cultura a Firenze*, in B. Arbei, S. Bruni and M. Iozzo (eds.), *Winckelmann, Firenze e gli Etruschi. Il padre dell'archeologia in Toscana*, ETS, Firenze 2016, pp. 21-35.

³² Venturini, Lucca 1767-1772, 3 voll.

³³ See G. Camporeale, *Mario Guarnacci: etruscologo del Settecento*, e C. Cagianelli, *La polemica Guarnacci-Passeri dopo la pubblicazione delle «Origini Italiane»*, both in «Rassegna volterrana», 79, 2002, pp. 7-37 and 101-114.

³⁴ D. Ridgway, *James Byres and the ancient state of Italy. Unpublished documents in Edinburgh*, in *Atti del secondo congresso internazionale etrusco*, Bretschneider, Roma 1989, pp. 215-216.

³⁵ «We cannot attribute this to their want of records or historians. It is probable that the Romans as they conquered the different states of Italy, especially the Etruscans, destroyed their books and records as they afterwards did those of the Carthaginians. Fearing that posterity should receive any account of their actions other than the one they chose to give themselves or envious of the high antiquity of some of these nations in comparison with their own» (ivi, p. 6).

³⁶ NLS, ms. 10339, [J. Byres], *Journal of my gaunt to Sicily in company with M. Wilbraham*.

³⁷ Ridgway, *James Byres*, cit., p. 221.

³⁸ *Journal of my gaunt*, f. 19.

³⁹ From Naples we part through Portici, Resina to Torre del Greco was Vesuvius smoking throwing gerandolos [...] and the lave running down [...] between the Torre del Greco and the Torre dell'Annunziato stand the remain soft the last great eruption in 1761 caused [by] the lava that

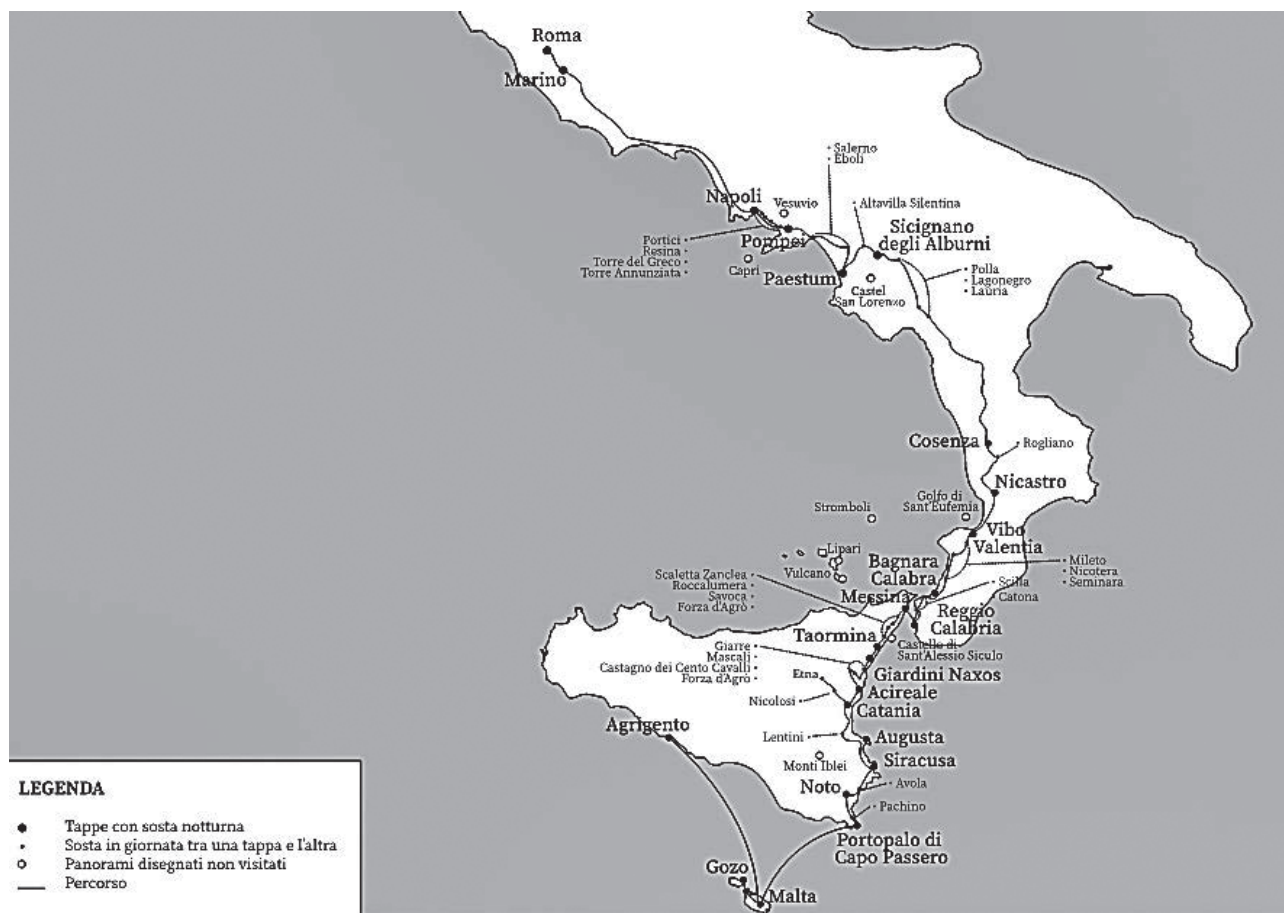


Fig. 1. The path of Byres and Wilbraham in Southern Italy.

math of a minor telluric upheaval, the detailed description of which seems to be the most significant moment of the entire journey⁴⁰.

Alongside this interest, there was no lack of interest in stone types and fossil elements that could date the southern territory, as well as archaeological finds that signalled the presence of different peoples in southern Italy. The first indication comes from a visit to the collection preserved

at the Carthusian monastery of Padula, where Byres notes the presence of Etruscan vases that confirm the Tyrrhenian identity of Campania in ancient times⁴¹. But the most significant notes are those dedicated to the Prince of Biscari's collection in Catania: the presence of Greek, Etruscan and Egyptian artefacts suggests these words to Byres

... we saw the Museum of Prince de' Biscari which is very large and complete in sculpture [...] he has an excellent collection of Etruscan vases some very ancient found at Camarina some with Etruscans, some with Egyptians and some with Greek figures on them and with Greek and Etruscan inscriptions. Which I think shows that these nations had great communications together and borrowed their arts from one another⁴².

burst out at that time from the bottom of the mountain one fourth of a milebroad to run into the sea» (ivi, f. 10).

⁴⁰ See e.g. the attention paid to the lapillus that «changed form in the air, and flattened in falling; every ninth or tenth stroke was greater than the others. I believe they may have risen about 400 feet high, for I observed several of the stones of lava twenty-eight seconds in the air before they began to fall. It was attended with a great noise, like that of a number of iron mills turned by a great cascade of water and now and then a slip below round the mountain leaked distinct thunder with slight shocks of an earthquake; in the daytime it was a thick black smock and the lava of a slip crimson leaked blood, but in the night time the smock was beautifully illuminated from the crater and the gerandola sleek liquid flames, the gerandolos rose almost perpendicular and falling all round had formed a little hill...» (ivi, ff. 59-60).

⁴¹ «We were most hospitably received at St. Lorenzo by the Carthusian monks [...] Don Mariano Corrado attended us and showed us the convent which is very large and magnificent in the library several Etruscan vases, ancient irons and medals found in digging about the ancient city of ...» (ivi, f. 21r).

⁴² Ivi, f. 54v.

In short, Guarnacci's theses seemed to be confirmed: Sicily had been joined to the peninsula⁴³, had had the same civilisation as southern Italy and had also been inhabited by people of Etruscan origin⁴⁴. Byres' focus on volcanology was explained in the same way: he believed he could prove, on the basis of Pliny's and Strabo's statements, that the Etruscans had first reached the Aeolian Islands and then – following a devastating eruption of Stromboli – had passed with the Siculians to eastern Sicily⁴⁵. Moreover, the passage to Malta was also intended to verify the arguments of Scipione Maffei, who doubted the existence of finds testifying to the presence of Phoenicians on the island⁴⁶. And whose artefacts then, if not the ubiquitous Etruscans?

On the other hand, the same search had animated almost all the stops during the voyage: in Campania Byres and Wilbraham had successfully searched for Etruscans and had continued to do so in Calabria, as far as Reggio – which a local tradition held to be of Tyrrhenian origin, like Messina – to continue the same search in Sicily⁴⁷. Not surprisingly, they had combed the entire area inhabited by the Siculians and then pushed on as far as Agrigento, which at the time was mistakenly considered the place with the greatest number of Etruscan vases found. To all this is added the missing piece mentioned by Winckelmann, i.e. the passage to Enna, the traditional borderland between Sikel and Siculians. In that case, too, Byres and Wilbraham were in search of an Etruscan presence, which was evidently rumoured (and indeed still rumoured today)⁴⁸. Their search, how-

ever, led to nothing, because they only found a tower, which at the time was believed to have been built by the Arabs and instead dated back in the first half of the 20th century to the years of Frederick II of Swabia⁴⁹.

And yet, precisely for these reasons, it is not surprising that Byres prepared a trip to London in search of subscribers to publish his history of the Etruscans. The timing seemed propitious: just in 1766 the French d'Hancarville published a volume of engravings entitled *Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman antiquities from the cabinet of the Hon.ble. William. Hamilton, His Britannick Majesty's envoy extraordinary at the Court of Naples*. The text explaining the engravings was written with contributions by Winckelmann and seemed to inaugurate a season of great international fortunes for Etruscan civilization. Byres' initiative was intended to fit into this climate of interest in the ancient Italic people. Thus Byres suggested that the Etruscans were at the basis of Mediterranean civilisation and that only their defeat before the Romans had erased them from history. These are Byres' words

... the Romans as they conquered the different states of Italy, especially the Etruscans, destroyed their books and records as they afterwards did with those of the Carthaginians. Fearing that posterity should receive any account of their actions other than the one they chose to give themselves, or envious of the high antiquity of some of these nations in comparison with their own...⁵⁰.

Based on these notes, Peter Davidson has suggested how, with an easy analogical play, Byres used the category of anti-Romanism to speak of the sad fate of his Scottish homeland⁵¹. The son of a Jacobite who had been present at Culloden, he would have, in short, proposed the story of the Etruscans as an allegory of the annexation suffered by Scotland by the crown of England. The hypothesis is intriguing, but perhaps too ambitious for a man who always remained closed within the reassuring horizon of erudition. Instead, it seems more likely that Byres resorted to anti-Romanism primarily to substantiate his idea that the Etruscans were the progenitors of classical civilisation.

On the other hand, any possible allusion to Scottish nationalism fell on deaf ears: the work found very few

⁴³ «I think that the old opinion of Italy and Sicily having been moine is very probable but I should imagine that they had been separated at universal deluge» (ivi, f. 39r).

⁴⁴ Regarding this point, which would later find in Mario Guarnacci the most resolute supporter of the Sicel's belonging to the Etruscan world, it is worth remembering that it is recalled by ancient writers, first by Thucydides and then by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. The latter, in order to substantiate the Greek identity of Rome, recalls the expulsion of the Sicel from Umbria as one of the reasons that would later lead to the birth of the Eternal City. Scipione Maffei, against Etruscanism, would have confirmed the origin of the Siculi in the heart of central Italy, ruling out nothing less than that they were a group of Etruscans.

⁴⁵ See on this topic Colonna, *Apollon, les Étrusques et Lipara*, «Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité», 96, 1994, pp. 557-578.

⁴⁶ «There are some remains of marble columns and ornaments which they say belonged to a theatre. They are roman work, there is sometimes punick medals found here, there is lacquered punick inscriptions. I saw here some sarcophagus [...] of a very singular form exactly that of an Egyptian mummy» (*Journal of mygaunt*, f. 84). Concerning Maffei's assertions, see S. Maffei, *Della nazione etrusca e degl'Itali primitivi*, «Osservazioni letterarie», 4, 1739, pp. 196-197.

⁴⁷ See M. Sclafani, *Salvatore Maria Di Blasi, un'anfora del Museo Martiniano ed il dibattito sui vasi cosiddetti etruschi*, «Quaderni del Museo Salinas», 8, 2002, pp. 55-70, and more in general on the Etruscans in Sicily R.M. Albanese-Procelli, *Gli Etruschi in Sicilia*, in G. Camporeale (ed.), *Gli Etruschi fuori d'Etruria*, Arsenale, Verona 2001, pp. 292-305.

⁴⁸ See e.g. U. Massocco, *Fulgidi segni dell'antica civiltà sicula*, «Giornale

di Sicilia», Palermo, 25 giugno 1958, and more recently Torre ottagonale di Enna, l'antico osservatorio astronomico costruito dai siculi etruschi, «L'Indipendente», 16 giugno 2021.

⁴⁹ P. Vetri, *Monumenti storici esistenti in Castrogiovanni*, Tip. Pagano, Castrogiovanni 1877, and G. Agnello, *L'architettura sveva in Sicilia*, Collezione meridionale editrice, Roma 1935.

⁵⁰ In Ridgway, *James Byres*, p. 6.

⁵¹ Davidson, *James Byres*, pp. 271-272.

subscribers and remained unfinished, although Byres did not resign himself to failure. Even in 1796, when he had already returned to Scotland, the «Gentleman's Magazine» recalled that

at Tough, in Aberdeenshire, resides Mr. Byres who for the last thirty years lived chiefly at Rome where he was well known and deservedly respected for his taste, learning and integrity. He proposed to publish the Etruscan Antiquities of Corneto, the ancient Tarquinium, in subscription, but with what success does not appear⁵².

However, the gentle words did not conceal the failure of the initiative and it is not difficult to ascribe the defeat to the concomitant triumphs of neo-classical taste, which – as is well known – only referred to the Greco-Roman dimension. On the other hand, Winckelmann himself admitted that the Etruscans had controlled the peninsula, but he considered them to be of Greek origin and, above all, he considered them to be entirely indebted to Greek civilisation⁵³. The conclusion is simple: the very fortunes of his work – which, among other things, demonstrated that the Etruscan vases scattered around the peninsula were not such – condemned Etruscan art to a subordinate position. As a result, Etruscan art failed to become popular in the world of the scholars of the 19th century.

The anti-Romanism that accompanied the rediscovery of the Etruscans, however, deserves a different approach. In fact, the theme was present in the European culture of the modern age and this is demonstrated by the fortunes in France of Celticism: the myth of a Gallic liberty destroyed by the Romans had great appeal as a response to the absolutism of Louis XIV and accompanied the will to resistance of the privileged classes towards the centralising monarchy throughout the 18th century⁵⁴. Not only that: in the aftermath of 1789, the fortunes of Celticism made it possible to propose to the Constituent Assembly that France should go back to calling itself Gaul, and the theme maintained visibility throughout the revolutionary years, when it seemed to legitimise the provinces' resistance to revolutionary rule⁵⁵.

It is therefore not surprising that anti-Romanism – and in particular the reference to the Etruscans – per-

sisted also in Italy, which from 1796 experienced the invasion of Bonaparte's French troops⁵⁶. Interest in the Etruscans and their ancient Mediterranean civilisation could in fact appear, from a cultural point of view, as an antidote to the political-administrative intrusiveness of revolutionary France. In the Napoleonic years we thus witness a return of interest in the Etruscans, which, however, developed along very different coordinates: on the one hand, according to a localist reading, the Etruscans became the predecessors of the Tuscans and were evoked to protect the distinctiveness of the region in the aftermath of the annexation, in 1808, to the French Empire. On the other hand, the imperial dimension of the Etruscans is emphasised, again to defend the peninsula from Napoleonic power, but with the intention of accrediting the political existence of an Italian nation. In the first case, the reference figure is Giuseppe Micali, a Leghorn scholar very suspicious of the French revolution, who in 1810 published a book on Italy before Roman rule, which gained much acclaim in 19th century Italy⁵⁷. His thesis was simple: Italy was an anthropologically plural reality, inhabited by peoples who were all very different from each other, but who had in common a cultural model, which could be traced back to that of the Etruscans. In his opinion, the Italic peoples did not include the Celts, a crude and destructive people, nor the peoples of the southern coasts, who had been contaminated by the Greek element. That left the Etruscans, whose civilisation had conquered all the other peoples of the peninsula, including the Romans. Micali, however, was against the latest findings of the Etruscans: in his opinion, Guarnacci was wrong when he wrote that the Etruscans were of Phoenician origin, wrong when he made them colonisers of Greece, and wrong again when he asserted that the Etruscans had transmitted their alphabet to the Greeks⁵⁸.

Quite simply, for Micali, the Etruscans were an indigenous population that had always been settled in

⁵² «The Gentleman's Magazine», 66, 1796, p. 222.

⁵³ G. Camporeale, *Rileggendo il capitolo: l'arte degli etruschi nella Storia dell'arte nell'antichità di Winckelmann*, «Atti e memorie dell'Accademia toscana di scienze lettere La Colombaria», n.s., 67, 2016, pp. 388-400.

⁵⁴ On this point, C. Grell, *L'histoire entre érudition et philosophie: étude sur la connaissance historique à l'âge des Lumières*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1993, pp. 261-274.

⁵⁵ See J.Y. Guiomar, *La Révolution française et les origines celtiques de la France*, «Annales historiques de la Révolution française», 287, 1992, pp. 63-85.

⁵⁶ See F. Mascioli, *Anti-Roman and Pro-Italic Sentiment in Italian Historiography*, «Romanic Review» 33, 1943, pp. 366-384. However, see now namely G. Giarrizzo, *La storiografia della nuova Italia*, vol. I: *Introduzione alla storia della storiografia italiana*, ed. by L. Scalisi, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2018, pp. 65-85.

⁵⁷ G. Micali, *L'Italia avanti il dominio de' Romani*, Piatti, Firenze 1810. On Micali and his work, see namely P. Treves, *L'idea di Roma e la cultura italiana del secolo XIX*, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli 1962, pp. 19-35; Id., *Lo studio dell'antichità classica nell'Ottocento*, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli 1962, pp. 293-311, and P. Desideri, *L'Italia di Giuseppe Micali e la cultura fiorentina del primo Ottocento*, in C. Bianca, G. Capecchi and P. Desideri (eds.), *Studi di antiquaria ed epigrafia per Ada Rita Gunnella*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2009, pp. 223-266.

⁵⁸ P. Desideri, *Gli Etruschi di Giuseppe Micali fra antiquaria e ideologia politica*, «Annali della Fondazione per il Museo Claudio Faina», 18, 2011, pp. 7-21.

central Italy and their dominance on the peninsula had only been cultural. Needless to say, Micali's proposal was a localist one: in the face of annexation to France, he claimed the original cultural identity of Tuscany, which had a long-standing primacy on the peninsula. His anti-Romanism was justified in this way: just as the Romans had wiped out the Etruscans, appropriating their culture without admitting predatory action, so the French could do the same to the homeland of the Renaissance and cultural modernity. The Italian discourse was completely absent from Micali's cultural orbit, which nevertheless grasped the problem: the Empire of the French was not just a military and administrative power, but a civilising model, which in turn sought in antiquity the legitimacy for dominance in Europe⁵⁹.

It is no coincidence that at the very moment of the birth of the French Empire in 1804, Napoleon agreed that a number of scholars from different political backgrounds (some had been ardently revolutionary, others had remained legitimists) should found the *Académie celtique*. Its first president, Lenoir, summed up the intentions of the new *société savante* in these words:

The desire to rediscover and reunite the ranks of glory bequeathed to their descendants by the Celts, the Gauls and the Franks, gives birth to the Académie Celtique. A sentiment both noble and natural to manifest in an epoch when France shows herself to be worthy of her ancestors. It is when Napoleon has led them for ten years from victory to victory that they have become more jealous to prove that the love of glory has always formed the main element in their character⁶⁰.

The promoters' intentions were explicit: they wanted to prove, on the basis of 18th-century French antiquarianism, that the Celts were the true founders of civilisation and thus wanted to give cultural legitimacy to Napoleonic France's claim to dominate Europe. These were assumptions which neighbouring Italy – an integral part of that federative system on which Bonaparte based his imperial claim – could hardly regard without a sense of great anxiety. Milan especially, soon capital of an Italian kingdom with Napoleon himself as its sovereign, feared that initiatives of this kind were designed to assert that the states arising out of revolutionary expansionism would have to accept a future of subjugation that was not only political but also cultural.

It is significant that the harshest criticism of this

prospect came from Vincenzo Cuoco, a Neapolitan patriot in Milan, who had published in 1801 an historical essay on the fall of the Neapolitan republic in 1799 and was involved in another, equally ambitious work, a philosophical novel along the lines of Barthélemy's *Anacharsis* entitled *Platone in Italia*, the first two volumes of which came out in 1804. In 1805 he used his pen to challenge the work of the *Académie celtique* and write to its promoters that «there will hardly be a place for your Celts or any other people you like to imagine more ancient than the Etruscans»⁶¹.

Shortly thereafter, namely in 1806, Cuoco published the third and final volume of his *Platone in Italia*, a novel in which he imagined that Plato had travelled the peninsula in search of philosophical wisdom. In this reconstruction, Cuoco punctually quoted and took up Mario Guarnacci's basic thesis: the Etruscans had inhabited the entire peninsula and had scattered throughout the Mediterranean, had given civilisation to the Greeks, so that when the latter had arrived in southern Italy, they had not colonised it, because they had only rejoined their brothers from long ago.

It is important to underline how Cuoco and Micali read Guarnacci's work in opposite terms: Micali condemned its fantasies and considered it completely useless to his localist theses, whereas Cuoco made it his own, because Guarnacci's pages allowed him to imagine an Italian nation that at the time existed only in the minds of a few. In short, Guarnacci's Etruscans allowed Cuoco with a *contrivance* to solve the ethnic problem of the Italians, because he made them a single strain thanks to the (presumed) existence of an ancient Etruscan empire throughout the Mediterranean. Thus, having solved the national dilemma, Cuoco could claim a path of freedom for the peninsula, because Italy's cultural primacy, in antiquity as in modernity, entitled it to aspire to full independence.

Needless to say, Cuoco and Micali were polar opposites: Micali was an 18th-century scholar who sought to preserve Tuscan identity from the encroachments of nationality, whether French or Italian made little difference in this regard; Cuoco was a patriot from southern Italy who, during his years in Milan, had ended his ties with the Neapolitan nation in order to embrace the cause of an Italian state that would unite the entire peninsula through a nationalising project⁶².

These were two different but parallel paths that would accompany the Italian national movement until the creation in 1861 of the unitary state (and beyond). On

⁵⁹ See on this point, A. De Francesco, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation: the origins of a Political Myth in Modern Italy, 1796-1943*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2013, pp. 53-57.

⁶⁰ See the inaugural speech of Lenoir in *Mémoires de l'Académie Celtique*, (1) 1807, pp. 7-23.

⁶¹ A. Andreoni, *Etruschi, sanniti e storiografia delle origini: carte inedite di Vincenzo Cuoco*, «Annali cuochiani», 1, 2003, p. 15.

⁶² De Francesco, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation*, pp. 35-41.

the one hand, Micali's work would have given strength to the federalist theses, which insisted on the hypothesis of Italian unity through the free union of a plurality of small homelands; on the other hand, Cuoco's work would have recalled the need for a national state that would put local peculiarities to one side in the name of a modernising project. And needless to say, their reference to the Etruscans, so different and opposed, would be maintained throughout the 19th century⁶³: confirming how the Italian national movement was indebted to the cultural models developed in the 18th century peninsula.

⁶³ See e.g. C. Leoni, *Opere storiche*, Tipografia Minerva, Padova 1844, pp. 3-16.



Citation: Dutta, S. (2025). From the Koh-i-noor to the *Hitopadesha*: Consumption of Indian Antiquities in the Colonial Market. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 33-48. doi: 10.36253/ds-15474

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

From the Koh-i-noor to the *Hitopadesha*: Consumption of Indian Antiquities in the Colonial Market

SUTAPA DUTTA

Gargi College, University of Delhi, India

Abstract. The paper examines both tangible and intangible materials that had a ritualistic value for Indians and once taken into the colonial market became objects of antiquity. The famous Koh-i-noor diamond was one such object which was a symbol of imperial sovereignty but once brought into the global market became a thing of antiquity. The meaning of certain objects change when moved from one place to another. It is this cross-cultural global contact that gives things their new meanings, and in this context the essay also looks at the *Hitopadesha*, a text on morals and ethics, 'the most popular story-book of India' as Max Muller called it. It is in the process of getting transferred/translated/transformed that such antiquities acquired a new meaning. The essay brings out the complex and ambiguous imperial dynamics of appropriating, recreating and canonization of such tangible and intangible antiquities from India.

Keywords: Indian antiquities, Koh-i-noor, *Hitopadesha*, Colonial Market, Exhibitionism.

Antiquities are objects that are time specific and culture specific. How objects are created, the changing ways in which they have been used, and how they have been understood and experienced over time and place, determine how they shape our understanding of antiquities. The meaning and significance of such objects is never static; it keeps shifting, changing and influencing the times in very varied ways. In a global context, the eighteenth century was particularly a profoundly material age. In an age marked by transformations in the movement of people and capital, of new lands being discovered, of imperialism and colonial expansion, of capitalism and new forms of communication, of rationalism and scientific discoveries, commodities began to play a crucial role in a new defining of identity both for the individual and the newly formed nations. The enabling factors which made this possible were undoubtedly the chain of effects of 'enlightenment' and 'modernization'. The movement of people, objects and biological species was primarily driven by a free market based on inequality, exploitation and proprietorship. At the same time, it was precipitated by scientific curiosity of exotic people and species, of the desire to collect and document for the sake of 'knowledge'. European repertoires of knowledge

production were deeply impacted by access to global commodities and encounters with the 'exotic'. The mobility and encounters in the Age of Enlightenment brought new meanings to people and objects. The most mundane of object could take on a different meaning and significance in a new setting. Recent scholarship is not only studying network of different institutions and places generating and circulating knowledge, but also investigating new connections between knowledge and the places of its production, of objects circulating through different spaces.¹ Schillings and Wickeren argue that «knowledge is produced in the interaction of humans, objects, and the spaces they are situated in».² Charles Withers has recently pointed out that the Enlightenment was «a geographical thing» which was, he argues, a multiplicity of geographical locations, such as scientific/savant or agricultural societies which have to be taken seriously as spaces for the distribution and production of knowledge in the 18th century³. Material objects are a means of highlighting certain aspects of personal, social and cultural identities, a complex process which involves a wide range of associations and conceptions based on use and practice. It is through the use and practices by human actors that the context and meaning of different objects are brought into interplay in the processes of knowledge production.

Tacit knowledge is then an eminently social process, founded upon a deep connection between human agents and their material surroundings, based largely upon experience and practice of human actors, and passed on over time and generation. This is based on formal/informal, stated/unstated habits, conventions, associations, and practices in social interaction – all tied not just to human agency but also to include the non-human. The signifier and signified of material/immaterial, tangible/intangible objects is the specific alignment between what it means in a particular time and space and what it is perceived as in another time and space. This bond between the signifier and the signified can be severed and reconstructed, infused with new meanings and new values over time and place. Meaning can be inscribed and/or discursively constructed. The history of tangible/intangible objects can provide valuable understanding of past sensibilities and values, and dimensions of human evolution and social changes. It shows how meaning of

objects is shaped by human intentionality and provides a blueprint of societal codes and practices.

The formative period of British Antiquity study coincides with a time of political stability, rapid economic growth, exploration of new places on the map, and the need to record for posterity. Antiquarianism was profoundly influenced by two historic developments: the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery. Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th century interest in other people and their material culture was superimposed by the flowering of the Enlightenment and Romanticism in England. The Royal Society of Antiquaries evolved from a group of intellectuals interested in the history of antiquities. The Society was founded in 1718, and aspects of pre-Roman Britain were the first to attract attention. The term 'Antiquity' or 'Classical Antiquity' has been synonymous with the ancient Greco-Roman civilization. The late Victorian and Edwardian fascination with everything Greek or Roman was a product of contemporary British imperialism, as can be seen in the predominantly Greco-Romano-centric collections in the British Museum and the Museum of London. From 1861 to 1888, Hellenic antiquities dominated in these museums, making it the largest and most representative collection of Greek/Roman originals in the world⁴. The preference for Roman and Greek antiquities were to highlight Britain's global power by hinting at the parallel with these glorious ancient empires. Some recent scholarships explore engagements with Greco-Roman Antiquity across Europe and beyond in the 18th century, and the ways in which Classical antiquities were perceived and studied during the age of Enlightenment, and how they served the formulation and affirmation of new ideals⁵.

Classical Antiquity was peripheral to the West. It was constricted in time, geographical space and civilization that was essentially organized on a East-West rubric. It signals a regional, relational, and critical orientation that is too often Eurocentric, and yet invites questions of comparison across and between cultures. The tendency is to reproduce binarisms by homogenizing civilizational categories, categories of the 'exotic' or the 'global', that reinforce the exoticism or antiquity of the East in contrast to the progress and modernism of the West. Too often, an East-West frame also invokes either the harmonious 'meeting' of one and another, or the encounter of two opposing worlds. Such hierarchical

¹ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford 1991; D. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003.

² P. Schillings and A. van Wickeren, *Towards a Material and Spatial History of Knowledge Production: An Introduction*, «Historical Social Research», 40, 2015, 1, pp. 203-218.

³ C. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007, p. 5.

⁴ 'Museum Representation of Roman Britain and Roman London: A Post-Colonial Perspective' by Martin Polm. *Britannia*, vol. 47. 2016, 209-241, 212.

⁵ C. Harker, J. Jacob, J. Süßmann, eds., *The Reception of Antiquity in the Age of Enlightenment*, Leiden, Brill 2021; D. R. Kelley, ed., *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* by, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) and London 1991.

dialectics are invariably linked to power structures, and that producing geographical knowledge has most frequently, in one way or the other, been entangled with the exercise of power or control over other world regions. Some historians speak of the symbiotic relationship between geography and imperialism, and it has been argued that accumulation of knowledge was as much about geography, as it was deeply concerned with power, and the legitimation, reproduction, and perpetuation of a self-image and a self-definition of territory⁶.

The article studies the attitude of the West towards objects, and the ways in which the Western world has seen and responded to the Eastern material world. In the context of colonial appropriation, I will try to bring out the complex and ambiguous imperial dynamics of usurping, recreating and canonization of two such tangible and intangible antiquities from India. The essay explores the ways in which the meaning of certain objects change when moved from one place or context to another, and how cross-cultural global contact gives things their new meanings. One, is the famous Koh-i-noor diamond, which was a symbol of royalty/sovereignty but once brought into the global market became an object of antiquity. The other is the *Hitopadesha*, an ancient text on morals and ethics, «the most popular story-book of India» as Max Muller called it⁷, which in the process of getting transferred and translated acquired a new meaning.

A diamond, known among the Greeks as *adamas*, was an indestructible material. Owing to the fact that a diamond was the hardest object in nature, which no metal or mineral could cut or grave any impression upon, the diamond literally meant ‘unconquerable’, or ‘indomitable’. India has been known as a prolific source of diamonds for the longest time, producing by far the greatest number of celebrated diamonds. Of all of them, the Koh-i-noor is the most famous, having weighed more than 787 carats in its original state, according to Jean Baptiste Tavernier the French gem merchant who visited Aurangzeb’s court between 1638 and 1665⁸ [Fig. 1].

Few, if any gems have so prominent a position in legends and history as the original Koh-i-noor. More than 5000 years ago, the ancient Hindu literatures mentioned the Syamantaka Jewel that hung around the neck of the Sun God and gave him his brilliance. The popular tale represented the gem as an emblem of glory, prosperity and brilliance. Some chroniclers claim this to be the

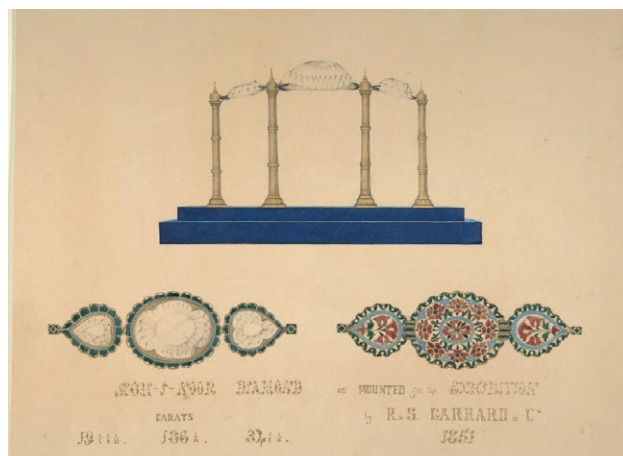


Fig. 1. Drawing of Koh-I-Noor Diamond, 1851. Artist: R. S. Garrard & Co. The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1966.

original Koh-i-noor, but that is obviously not likely. But what emerges from such mythical tales is the importance of the stone in the life of the ancient people, how essential it is for the welfare of the kingdom, and the inevitable rivalry, strife, violence, and community feuds that erupt as consequences of the ownership of such jewels. Lord Krishna, the Preserver in the Hindu Trinity, is said to have been associated with this rare gem, and it was his wisdom and sagacity that enabled him to decide that the gem must be worn only by a virtuous and pure person⁹. The aura of myth and legend associated with jewels was seen throughout, with the Mahabharata mentioning the divine jewel that Yudhishthira wore. It is not difficult to see how over the years the Koh-i-noor, a historically identifiable stone, has attained the status of a legendary and mythical symbol of indomitable and eternal power, and also the very essence of Indian life and spirit.

The Koh-i-Noor, meaning mountain of light, before it ended up in the British Crown Jewels by the mid-1800s, had a long history of court intrigues, with all the lore, romance, blood, and drama. Its murky past was shrouded with myth and mystery, including a rumor that the diamond is cursed. Although it is impossible to know exactly when the Koh-i-Noor came into the Mughals’ possession, there is a definite point at which it appears in the written record. When the Mongols attacked and plundered Agra, the royal family of Agra offered a huge diamond to the Mughal ruler Humayun as peace offering, a stone weighing 186 carats that was

⁶ M. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographic Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997.

⁷ M. Muller, *The First Book of the Hitopadesa: Containing the Sanskrit Text*, Longman, Roberts, & Green, London 1864, «Preface», p. VII.

⁸ See F. M. Endlich, *Diamonds*, «The American Naturalist», XII, 7, July 1878, pp. 419-30: 423.

⁹ For the complete tale, see S. Howarth *The Koh-i-noor Diamond: The History and the Legend*, Quartet Books, London/Melbourne/NewYork 1980, pp. 15-24.

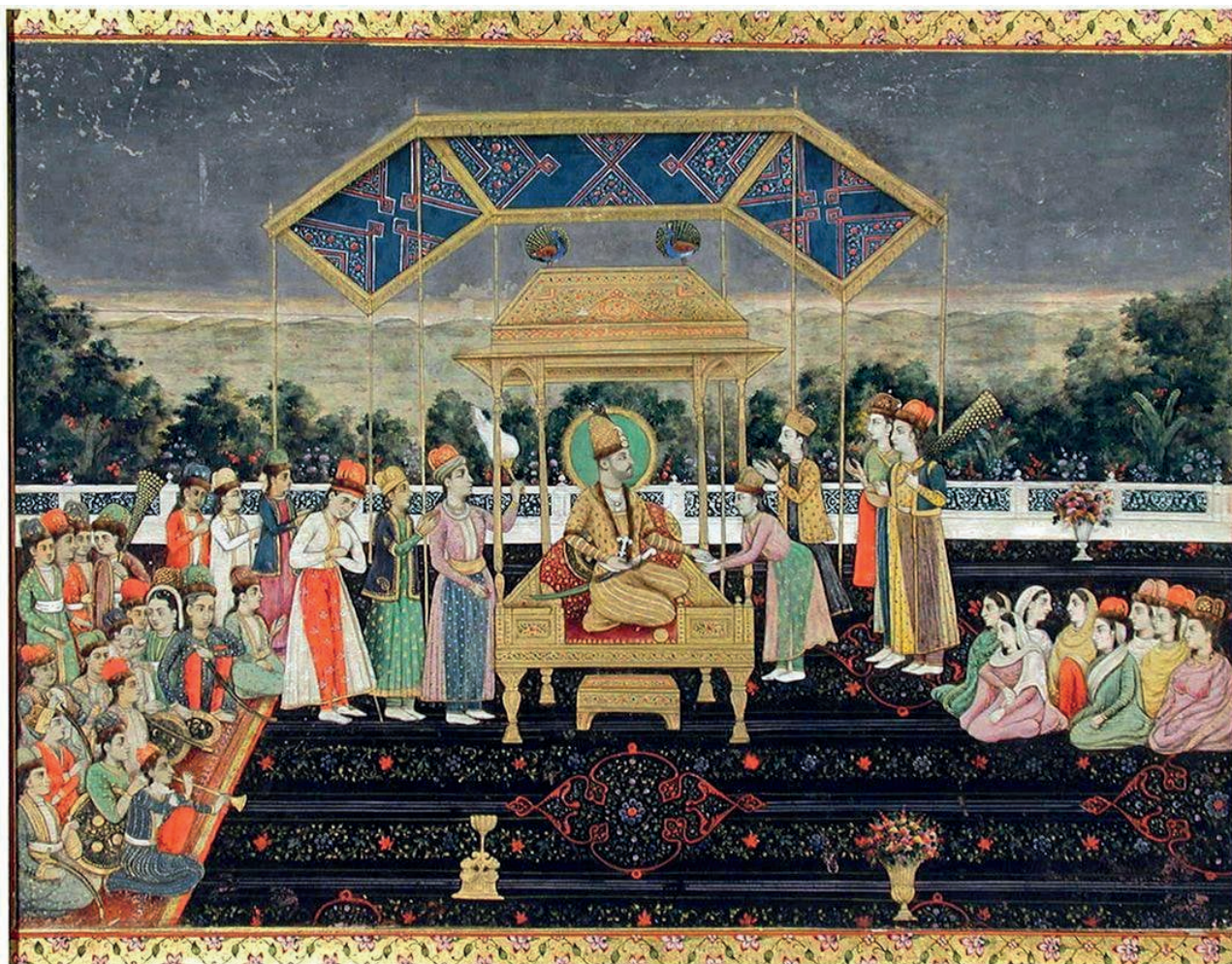


Fig. 2. Nadir Shah on the Peacock throne, 1850. From Wikimedia Commons.

said to be «worth half the daily expenditure of the world». The diamond came to be known as Babur's Diamond has been often identified as the Koh-i-noor, and for the first time becomes a definite historical object. Tavernier's journals mention the «Great Mogul», a splendid diamond that was presented to Shah Jahan. There is a great deal of confusion and different interpretations and theories to identify which one of these was the Koh-i-noor. In 1628, Shah Jahan commissioned a magnificent, gemstone-encrusted throne. Among the many precious stones that adorned the throne was the Koh-i-Noor diamond. The diamond was lodged at the very top of the throne, in the head of a glistening gemstone peacock. For a century after the creation of the Peacock Throne, the Mughal Empire retained its supremacy in India and beyond. When Nadir Shah invaded Delhi in 1739, amongst the looted treasure was the Peacock Throne. The story goes that when Nadir

Shah saw the diamond for the first time, he exclaimed «Koh-i-noor», the «Mountain of Light», and the stone got its name by which it became a legend [Fig. 2].

The Koh-i-Noor would remain away from India for the next 70 years, in a country that would become Afghanistan. It passed between the hands of various rulers in one blood-soaked episode after another, acquiring a fanciful reputation of ill-luck and curses for those who owned it. After decades of fighting, the diamond returned to India and came into the hands of the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1813, whose particular affection for the gem ultimately sealed its aura of prestige and power. Worn by Ranjit Singh, known as the 'Lion of Punjab', as an armband, with the Koh-i-noor set between two smaller ones on either side, the gem seems to have held a far greater symbolism for him [Fig. 3].

Singh's elevation of the diamond as a symbol of triumph and a source of great pride was a major turning



THE KOH-I-NOOR, OR MOUNTAIN OF LIGHT, IN ITS ORIGINAL SETTING.

Fig. 3. Koh-i-noor arm-band, as it was originally presented to Queen Victoria. From Wikimedia Commons.

point in its history¹⁰. Dalrymple and Anand also maintain that this was a pivotal moment when the stone was esteemed not just for its beauty or monetary value, but as a symbol of potency, as «a crowning achievement, the seal on his status as the successor to the fallen dynasty» of Ahmad Shah Durrani¹¹. William Osborne, the military secretary to Lord Auckland the governor-General, who visited Singh's court valued the diamond at three million sterling¹². During the last few days of Ranjit Singh's life, when the monarch lay dumb and paralysed, the Brahmin priests tried their best to get him to assent to donating the diamond to a Hindu temple. It was due to the timely intervention of the guardian of the treasure house that the jewel was protected and remained in the kingdom. It was no longer a personal possession that could be given away on the whim of an individual, even if the individual was the King. The jewel had attained an abstract status, symbolic of 'a people', of the crown and the kingdom.

After Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, which was followed by a violent period, the British East India Company imposed the terms of condition of a treaty which meant that Ranjit Singh's 10 year old son Duleep Singh had to sign a legal document that required him to give away the Koh-i-Noor and all claims to sovereignty. On 6 April 1850, the diamond made a journey in an iron-bound chest to England passing through dramatic vicissitudes, some of it albeit exaggerated, before it reached Queen Victoria's court. The Koh-i-noor was subsequently presented to Victoria in 1850 on the occasion of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the East India Company's charter by Maharaja Duleep Singh rather than through the East India Company. The

bypassing of the Company was not what Lord Dalhousie the then Governor-General in India was happy about, but in a letter in 1849, he expressed why such a symbolic handing over was important:

[My] motive was simply this: that it was more for the honour of the Queen that the Koh-i-noor should be surrendered directly from the hand of the conquered prince into the hands of the sovereign who was his conqueror, than that it should be presented to her as a gift [...] by any joint-stock company among her subjects¹³.

Dalhousie was triumphant. «I have caught my hare», he wrote, and further added:

The Koh-i-noor has become in the lapse of ages a sort of historical emblem of conquest of India. It has now found its proper resting place¹⁴.

The defeated young Maharaja was compelled to offer the diamond directly to the Queen in a staged ceremonial *darbar*, and Dalhousie justified it thus:

The Koh-i-Nur [sic] has ever been the symbol of conquest. [...] I have a right to compel the Maharaja of Lahore, in token of his submission, to surrender the jewel to the Queen, that it may find its final and fitting resting-place in the crown of Britain¹⁵.

Two years later when Singh traveled to England to meet the Queen, he sat for a portrait. In an ironic symbolic reversal of roles, the painting depicted the diamond-studded Victoria, and Singh wearing a miniature of Victoria around his neck.

From there, the diamond became a special possession of Queen Victoria. It was displayed at the 1851 Great Exhibition in the specially constructed Crystal Palace in London [Fig. 4].

The most prominent imperial display was the Indian court, suggesting an untapped vast resource of wealth and resources. Exhibitionism, consumerism and spectacle were part of a conscious re-working of identities. It was an 'age of exhibitions', fashioned by the inter-cultural contact with the outside world, and the need for the interrogation and display of Britishness¹⁶. To quote

¹⁰ I. Balfour, *Famous Diamonds*, Christie, Manson and Woods, London 1997, p. 167.

¹¹ W. Dalrymple and A. Anand, *Kohinoor: The Story of the World's Most Infamous Diamond*, Juggernaut, New Delhi 2016, pp. 82-3.

¹² Howarth, *The Koh-i-noor Diamond*, cit., p. 111.

¹³ Quoted in J. Mehta, *English Romance; Indian Violence*, «The Centennial Review», 39, 3, Fall 1995, pp. 611-657: 615.

¹⁴ Dalhousie to Hobhouse, 9 April 1849. In Dalrymple and Anand, *Koh-i-noor*, cit., p. 2.

¹⁵ Quoted in D. C. Kinsey, *Koh-i-Noor: Empire, Diamonds, and the Performance of British Material Culture*, «Journal of British Studies», 48, 2 (Special Issue on Material Culture), pp. 391-419: 396.

¹⁶ L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 1992.

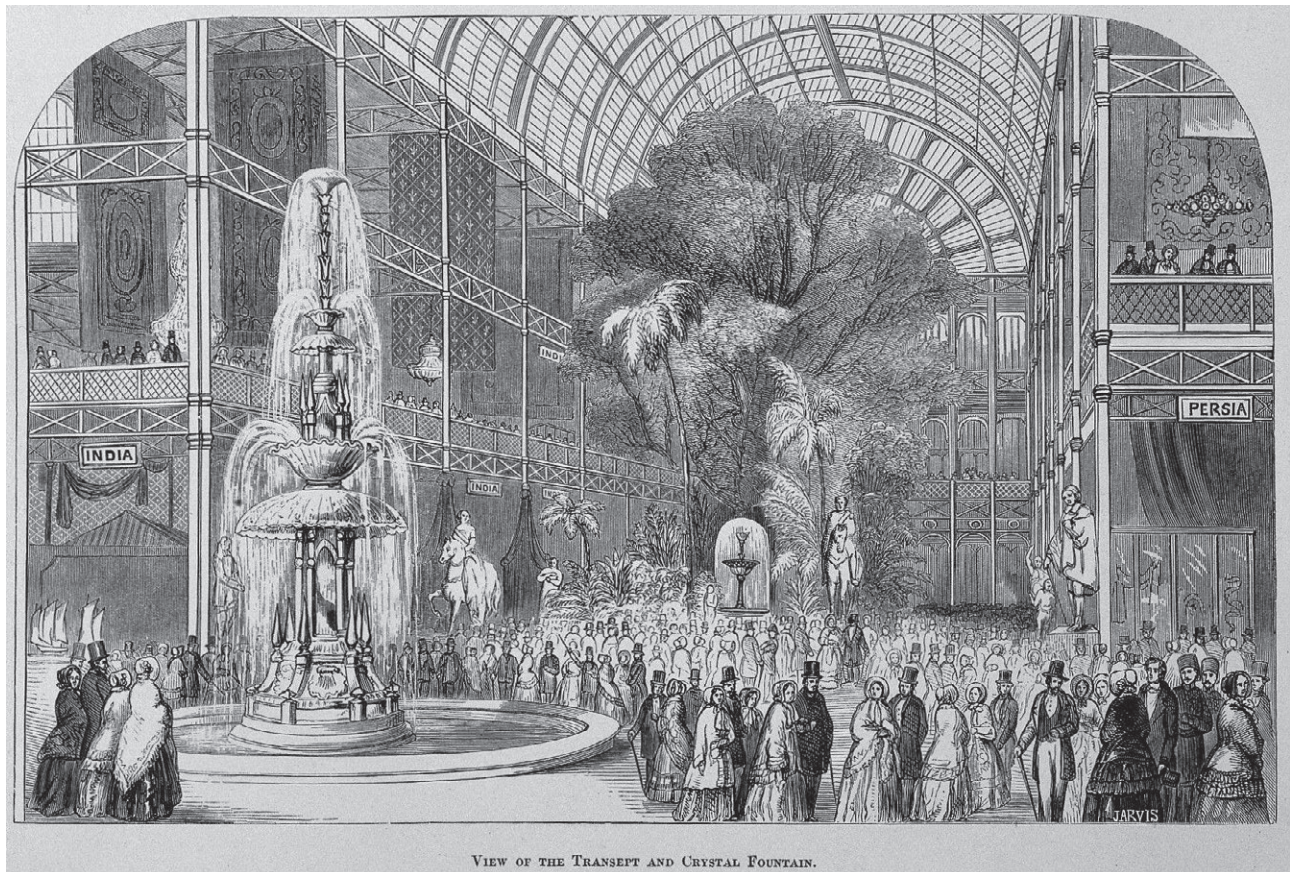


Fig. 4. The Great Exhibition, London, 1851. Wikipedia.

Hoffenberg, «Exhibitions were part of the self-conscious reworking of fluid national and imperial identities» in this era¹⁷. The centerpiece of the show of the world's greatest empire was the diamond that had caught the imagination of the public¹⁸. The usually staid *The Times* gushed about the Crystal Palace whose «sides shone in the sun like the Koh-i-noor itself». Many of the 6 million spectators who came to the exhibition came specifically to see the diamond. It was to be admired as Dalhousie had said, as «a historical symbol of conquest». The jewel lay in a gilt cage, exhibited as a captured product of imperial plunder. No clear narrative was presented as to how it came into Queen Victoria's possession, «exactly how it passed from the jewel-room of Lahore to its present resting place – whether it became British property by seizure or forfeit, or whether it fell to the Queen by

tribute»¹⁹. But the British public was dismayed at how simple it was. «Many people find a difficulty in bringing themselves to believe, from its external appearance, that it is anything but a piece of common glass», wrote *The Times* in June 1851. «To ordinary eyes it is nothing more than an egg-shaped lump of glass. [...] Unhappily, the Koh-i-Noor does not sparkle [...] the most curious thing is not the divinity, but the worshippers»²⁰. Many visitors were mistaken into thinking that the Koh-i-noor was the enormous crystal that occupied the central place in the exhibition. Newspapers and magazines, like the *Punch* gently satirized the disillusioned reaction of the provincial folk when they saw the «greyt Dimun under that brass kage» [Fig. 5].

The *Illustrated London News* regarded the Koh-i-noor as 'gigantic, but somewhat rough and unhewn',

¹⁷ P.H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2001, p. XIV.

¹⁸ J.A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999.

¹⁹ Lord Ellenborough is a Napier Togatus, «*The Times*», 27 May 1851, p. 5.

²⁰ J. Tallis, *Tallis's History of the Crystal Palace*, John Tallis, London 1852, vol. I, p. 150.



Fig. 5. *Punch*, 1851, Vol. 20, p. 200. Google Book.

clearly a metaphor for India²¹. The Indian aesthetic had valued the stone for its size, and the importance it held as a symbol of conquest. It was not just a stone that was monetarily invaluable; it had its own immeasurable and intangible worth as a symbol of honour. The western aesthetics perceived the value of diamonds based on looks – on lustre and flawlessness. The *Illustrated London News* stated that «its marketable value would increase» if it was cut by a European diamond cutter²².

Given its disappointing reception, Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, had the stone recut and polished. The diamond was «properly treated» and «refined» – a process that reduced its size by half but made the light refract more brilliantly from its surface. It was unrecognizable from its former shape and size. The *New-York-Semi-Weekly Tribune* of September 1852 praised it as «unsurpassed by any diamond above the ground in shape, lustre and beauty»²³. The diamond thereby became an ornamental gem which Victoria wore as a brooch. Following widespread rumours that the stone was cursed if it was worn by men, her Majesty

²¹ The «*Illustrated London News*», 17 May 1851. Quoted in J.A. Auerbach, *Empire under glass: The British Empire and the Crystal Palace, 1851-1911*, in J.McAleer and J.M. MacKenzie, eds., *Exhibiting the Empire: Cultures of Display and the British Empire*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2015, p. 115.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ B.P. Dean, *Thoreau and 'The Celebrated Koh-i-noor Diamond*, «*The Thoreau Society Bulletin*», 242, Winter 2003, pp.6-7.



Fig. 6. The Koh-i-noor-diamond in the British crown. Wikipedia.

ordered it to be set in her tiara. It was eventually mounted in the crown of Queen Elizabeth II during her coronation and became part of the Crown Jewels of British monarch [Fig. 6].

From an emblem of pride of an indomitable people, the stone had acquired a whole lot of new meanings. Firstly, it had become a prized acquisition, an exhibition of imperial glory that identified with permanence and indestructibility. For the British, owning the jewel of India, was literally the jewel in their crown, a symbol of prestige and power and possession of the land and people. Secondly, the diamond had been feminized. In the Indian context, the royal male bodies have been always heavily adorned with jewelry. In Indian courts, jewelry rather than clothing was the principle form of adornment and a visible sign of court hierarchy, with strict rules being laid down to establish which rank of courtier could wear which gem in which setting. Worn on the turbans and arms of men, the Koh-i-noor diamond was an emblem of conquest that expressed the wearer's divinity, prosperity, authority, and noble virility. Danielle Kinsey and others have focused in particular on the diamond's transformation from a power symbol of royal Eastern men into an accessory for royal British women: «The diamond registered more as an emblem of a frivolous, feminized, and Orientalized luxury commodity»²⁴.

²⁴ Kinsey, *Koh-i-Noor*, cit., p. 392.

By staging the diamond on the female body, the bejeweled Indian male body was aligned to extravagance, vanity and effeminacy. Thirdly, the recutting and refashioning of the Koh-i-noor became symbolic of the colonial civilizing mission. One cannot fail to see the symbolic integration of the tangible and the intangible fantasy – of the jewel and the conquered people to whom it belonged. Maharaja Duleep Singh, the disinherited boy-king who had been coerced to hand over the jewel, was now living in Britain, a darling of English society. Singh had adopted Christianity, had received a British education, and lived much of an English gentleman's life. Singh had become a charming specimen of what Macaulay had envisioned: «a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect». The Koh-i-noor's transformation to suit the taste of the English echoed the polish and refinement of the colonial subject to fit in the British high society. The reconstitution of the stone to make it pleasing and acceptable to the western sensibilities was similar to the agenda of civilizing mission which conveniently hid a very latent schema of colonial exploitation. If the weight of western science and machinery was literally brought to change the structure of the diamond, the pressure of education and religion was constituted to bring about a change in the colonized subjects' identity. In both cases, the being and the thing were seen as commodities, raw unformed lumps that had to be polished and cut out. The shifting of beings and things in time and space thereby performed different cultural, economic, and ideological work for different audiences. Since its arrival in England, the Koh-i-noor has been reserved exclusively for the adornment of queen consorts, and in keeping with the myth associated with the diamond, it has never been worn by a male.

As material objects and ideas moved between continents and communities, and the colonized and the colonizer had to increasingly depend on each other for 'knowledge', the crucial role of the construction and reconfiguration of knowledge became an important and challenging factor. Imperial knowledge was institutionalized and diffused in the form of material culture and ideas. The social nature of knowledge formation and its circulation is today evident from the increasing works on imperial encounters where the attempt is to look for 'contact zones' and unifying narratives to trace larger connections between the East and the West²⁵. Scholarly attention has been recently directed at how knowledge moves, gets negotiated, even contested, and is continuously moulded in the process. Prominent imperial his-

torians like C. A. Bayly contested the theory of a simple diffusion of power emanating from a pre-existing centre. Rejecting the idea of a hegemonic and Eurocentric nature of colonial knowledge, they argued for a circulation of knowledge. Bayly's *Empire and Information* presented a fresh perspective by proposing an alternative historical critique of colonialism and knowledge in eighteenth and nineteenth century India, by «deconstructing the notion of orientalism»²⁶. His criticism of the excessive connivances between knowledge and power was echoed by David Washbrook who critiqued the centre theory of knowledge production²⁷. James Secord in his seminal article *Knowledge in Transit* has argued that the frameworks for understanding the larger narratives of science have been largely constrained, and «we need to grapple with the circulation of knowledge at the right scale»²⁸. Kapil Raj posits that not just scientific knowledge but knowledge per se is not a one way dissemination but «a constantly shifting process in which both sides participate, and that makes such encounters complex historical events and moments of discovery»²⁹. Either way it cannot be denied that knowledge formed an essential part in the establishment of the British Empire in India. Indeed as each of these perspectives throws a new light on this intercultural encounter, it can be argued that the dialectics of diffusion of knowledge have been shaped at different times and space through contestations, collaborations and compromises.

To further the discussion on the connection between appropriations of antiquities and British imperialism in 18th-19th century, an important Orientalist project of late eighteenth century colonial India was the translation of the *Hitopadesha*. The *Hitopadesha* is a collection of short didactic stories written in the form of a chain of simple stories of animals with human characteristics, with each story emphasizing a moral. The *Hitopadesha*, literally meaning beneficial advise and originally written in Sanskrit has been regarded as a canonical text and is an integral part of the psyche of Indian children brought up on the moral and philosophical themes of the stories. In the late eighteenth century this text gained prominence when British orientalist William Jones and Charles Wilkins translated this into English. In 1786

²⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Information Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 370.

²⁷ D. Washbrook, *South India 1770-1840: The Colonial Transition*, «Modern Asian Studies», 38, 3, July 2004, pp. 479-516.

²⁸ J.A. Secord, *Knowledge in Transit*, «Isis», 95, 4, Dec 2004, pp. 654-672: 672.

²⁹ K. Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe. Seventeenth to nineteenth centuries*, Permanent Black, New Delhi 2006, p. 8.

²⁵ M.L. Pratt, 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 4.

Jones brought to everyone's attention the fables of the *Hitopadesha*, which he declared to be «the most beautiful, if not the most ancient, collection of apologues in the world»³⁰. This was then prescribed as a manual for instruction in the Fort William School in Calcutta. This became a standard school book and its stories were seen as an ideal model of moral instruction to inculcate the doctrine of prudence and policy and for the acquisition of virtues. Subsequently this was taken up by the English missionaries as a valuable teaching aid, for the moral improvement of the 'natives' and to infuse them with Protestant ethics like honesty, diligence, etc. With the help of Indian scholars, this went on to be translated in Bengali many times and was used as a primary educational material in Bengali schools. The nineteenth century then saw many more moral manuals in the form of short stories being written both in English and Bengali.

The enabling factors which made this possible were undoubtedly the chain of effects of 'modernization'. Industrialization, the introduction of the printing press, formal schooling, increasing literacy especially amongst the middle class, all contributed to the rational and scientific temperament of the age. When the East India Company established its political paramountcy in Bengal, education played an important role in legitimising their position. Education was considered a key to improve the general condition of humanity and stress was given on 'useful knowledge'. When Warren Hastings took up office in 1784, he was quick to acknowledge: «Every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state: it is the gain of humanity»³¹. That colonial knowledge was principally to construct colonial power has been substantially unmasked³². It has now been extensively argued that British oriental research and writing in India during 18th and 19th century was to serve the purpose of consolidating a growing Empire. Beginning from the early initiatives of Orientalists like William Jones and Charles Wilkins, and then the intellectual enterprises of the scholars at Fort William College in Calcutta to translate and reproduce Indian languages and literatures, the effort has been to «convince while they command»³³.

What frequently gets overlooked and unrecognized is the complex and ambiguous dynamics of such knowledge formations. The second half of the paper focuses on aspects of appropriating, recreating and canonization of «the most popular story-book of India» in order to understand orientalism's projection of ancient Indian scholarships in general and moral literature in particular. What got to be archived and consequently to be prescribed as a canonical textbook in schools was not just simply conducive to the empowerment of a colonial state, but a result of complex, intricate reasons and motives. It is often quite forgotten that such productions and formations of knowledge were collaborative Indo-European works done with the active assistance and participation of some «sensible natives»³⁴. Behind such apparently authoritative Eurocentric garnering of knowledge were the often indiscernible indigenous interests to forge their particular visions of identity and power. What were the major impulses for reviving an early Indian text to impart moral lessons in schools? Was it just plain admiration for the wisdom of an ancient civilization or was there a more insidious purpose in initiating such discourses on morality amongst the colonized subjects? What response did this elicit from the indigenous readers and what place did this text occupy in the moral pedagogy of modern India? More importantly, what needs to be seen are the ways of fostering a particular community's definitions of ethics and emotions, and how particular ethics and values of a community are then recreated and represented. Again, it is remarkable how such 'antiquities' from the past, with definitive values were appropriated and further used by the Bengali literati for their inherent interests.

The *Hitopadesha* was probably written in the sixth century A.D in Sanskrit. The identity of its author can be ascertained from the concluding verses of the *Hitopadesha* which mentions a Hindu scholar, by the name of Narayana Pundit who lived and enjoyed the patronage during the reign of King Dhavalachandra of Bengal. Written in the form of a chain of simple stories of animals with human characteristics, the *Hitopadesha* like the *Panchatantra* is an integral part of the psyche of Indian children brought up on the moral and philosophical themes of the stories. Narayana compiled his materials from various sources known at that time, notably the *Panchatantra*, and perhaps also borrowed his ideas from Chanakya's *Arthasashtra*³⁵. The *Hitopadesha* has been

³⁰ Quoted in C. Wilkins, *Fables and Proverbs from the Sanskrit: being the Hitopadesa*, George Routledge and Sons, London 1885 [1787], p. 10.

³¹ Letter of Hastings to N. Smith, October 4, 1784. Quoted in D. Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1969, p.18.

³² B.S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1997. E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1978.

³³ N.B. Halhed, *A Grammar of the Bengali Language*, Hoogly 1778, p. II.

³⁴ See W. Carey, *Dialogues intended to facilitate the acquiring of the Bengalee Language*, Printed at the Mission Press, Serampore 1818, «Preface».

³⁵ B. Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta 1996, fn 128.

considered «the father of all fables»,³⁶ the originator of all future fables by Aesop and Pilpay. Written originally in Sanskrit, it was rendered subsequently into Persian, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and Nepali [Fig. 7].

The Mughal Emperor of India, Akbar commended his Vazir, Abdul Fazal to render it into an abridged familiar style and published it under the title *Ayar Danish*, or *Criterion of Wisdom*³⁷. Winternitz's research shows that the evidence of fables existing in India can be traced way back to the 2nd century B.C.³⁸ Such collections of stories for religious and moral propaganda can be seen before in the *Jataka* stories, the narrative literature of the Buddhists, and the *Panchatantra*³⁹. The *Hitopadesha* clearly derives its inspiration from these earlier collections of stories, especially *Panchatantra* and «one other book» as the author mentions in the introductory stanzas of his work⁴⁰ [Fig. 8 and 9].

The work consists of four books – I: *Winning of Friends*; II: *Dissension among Friends*; III: *War and IV Peace* – and includes 17 stories and numerous epigrams⁴¹. Characterized by «the didactic and sententious note» and abundant «ethical reflections»⁴², this book was the *nitī-sashtra* («Essence of Conduct») intended as an educational manual for the sons of kings to be instructed in the science of political and ethical policies.

It was not until the *Hitopadesha* engaged the attention of the English Orientalists that so much attention has been bestowed on it. It was Sir William Jones, the English Orientalist who introduced Sanskrit literature to the West. During his brief stay of eleven years in India he mastered the Sanskrit language and made an invaluable contribution to literature in general by producing the first English translations of some of the greatest gems of Sanskrit literature. In 1784 he founded the Asiatic Soci-

³⁶ Wilkins, *Hitopadesa*, cit., «Introduction», p. 12.

³⁷ See *ivi*, and E. Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels: From the Sanskrit of the "Hitopadesa"*, Smith Elder and Co., London 1861, «Preface», p. X.

³⁸ Ludwik Sternbach's well researched *The Hitopadesa and its Sources* provide an invaluable insight into the inspiration for this collection of fables. But there is insufficient research work to categorically indicate its influence on other works of this genre. Ludwik Sternbach's work *On the Influence of Sanskrit Gnostic Literature on the Gnostic Literature of old Java and Bali* («Indologica Taurinensia», 1977, pp. 198-288) is a significant contribution in this direction. See also *Id.*, *The Hitopadesa and its Sources*, American Oriental Society, New Haven 1960.

³⁹ M. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. III, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi 1967, pp. 205-6.

⁴⁰ One of the most popular books written originally in Sanskrit is the book known as *Kalila wa-Dimna*, a bestseller for almost two thousand years.

⁴¹ Of the 600 epigrams 273 have political ideas, 222 are concerned with worldly wisdom, and 103 have a moral or religious theme. See Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, cit., vol. III, p. 328, fn 1.

⁴² A.A. Macdonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Munshi Ram Manoharlal, Delhi 1958 [1900], p. 368.

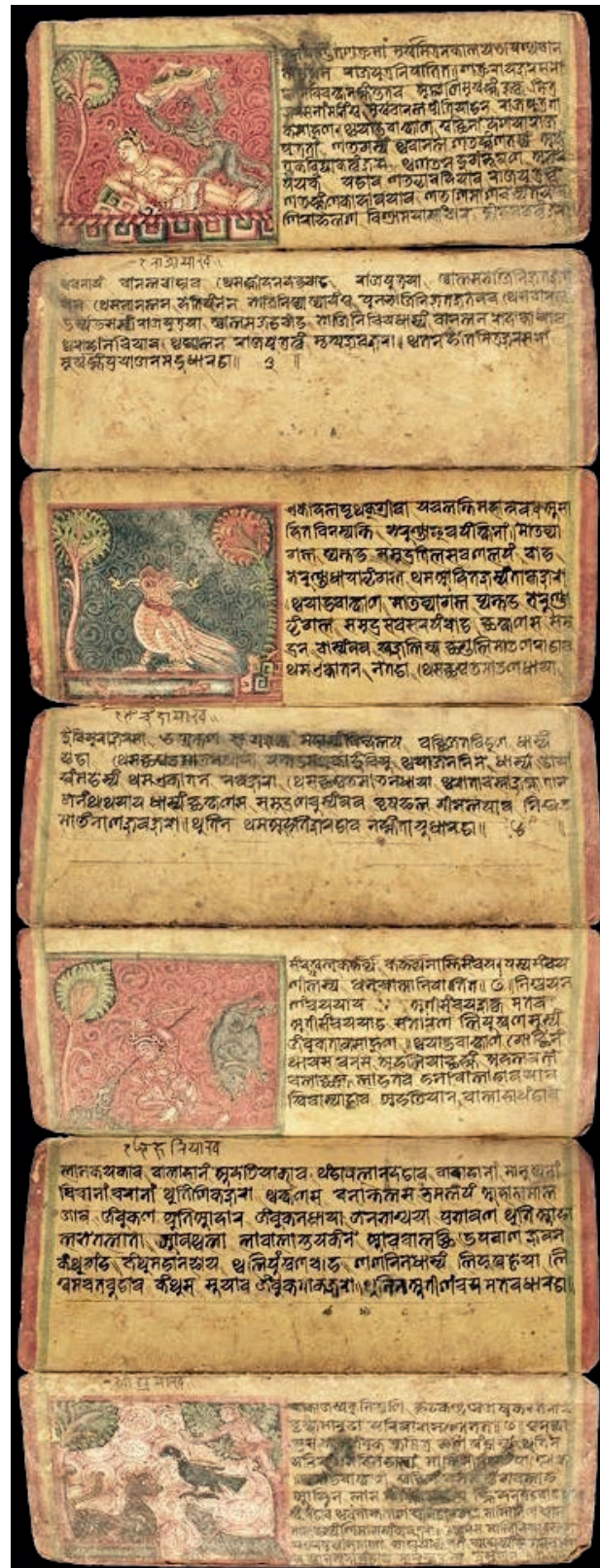


Fig. 7. The *Hitopadesha* - Nepalese manuscript, 1800. From Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 8. Kalila-wa-Dimna. The two jackals, Kalila and Dimna. Arabic illustration, 1220. Wikipedia.

ety of Bengal to encourage Oriental studies. In 1786 Jones brought to everyone's attention the fables of the *Hitopadesha*, which he declared to be «the most beautiful, if not the most ancient, collection of apologues in the world. [...] I am not disinclined to suppose that the first moral fables that appeared in Europe were of Indian or Ethiopian origin»⁴³. Jones' «Great Discoveries» were obviously intended for European readers to convey the religious and secular 'Indian' ideas to the West. English language readership in Calcutta was a minority, the dominant demographics being predominantly Bengalis⁴⁴.

Jones' friend and contemporary, Charles Wilkins' English translation of the *Hitopadesha* came out in 1787. In the Preface to this text he traces the antecedents of the *Hitopadesha*, and writes:

⁴³ See Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement*, cit., p. 140 and Wilkins, *Hitopadesa*, cit., p. 10.

⁴⁴ In the late 1830's there were 3138 English in Calcutta as compared to 1.200.318 Hindu Bengalis and 45.067 Muslim Bengalis. See T. Bhat-tacharya, *World of Learning The Material Culture of Education and Class in Nineteenth Century*, in M. Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* by, Ohio University Press, Athens (OH) 1952, p. 20.



Fig. 9. Painting by Syrischer Maler, 1354. From the *Panchatantra*: Rabbit fools Elephant by showing the reflection of the moon. From Wikimedia Commons.

The ancient Brahmins of India, after a great deal of time and labour, compiled a treatise [...] in which were inserted the choicest treasures of wisdom, and the perfectest rules for governing a people. This book they presented to the Rajahs, who kept it with the greatest secrecy and care. About the time of Mahommed's birth, or the latter end of the sixth century, Noishervan the Just, who then ruled in Persia, discovered a great inclination to see the book [...] He went to India; where, after some years' stay, and great trouble, he procured it. [...] Noishervan ever after, and all his successors, the Persian kings, had this book in high esteem, and took the greatest care to keep it secret. At last Abu Jaffer Mansour zu Nikky, who was the second Khal-iff of the Abassi reign, by great search got a copy thereof in the Pehluvi language, and ordered Iman Hossan Abdal Mokaffa, who was the most learned of the age, to translate it into Arabic. This prince ever after made it his guide, and not only in his affairs relating to the government, but in private life also⁴⁵.

This above quote emphasizes the value of this ancient 'treasure of wisdom' and the great pains taken by generations of kings and learned scholars to preserve it. Wilkins further asserts that «the Brahmins of the present times are totally ignorant» of the origin and composition of this narrative and gives credit to Sir William Jones for his «surprising talent [...] in seeking fresh sources of knowledge and promoting their cultivation»⁴⁶.

Sir Edwin Arnold too in the editorial introduction to his 1861 English translation of the *Hitopadesa* considers it a «treasure» which «holds the key to the heart of modern India». The *Hitopadesa*, he says, «is a work

⁴⁵ Wilkins, *Hitopadesa*, cit., pp. 11-12.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 9.

of high antiquity, and extended popularity. The prose is doubtless as old as our own era; but the intercalated verses and proverbs compose a selection from writings of an age extremely remote»⁴⁷. Like the earlier Orientalists, Arnold was quick to realize the immense potential of this valuable repository of ancient knowledge and wisdom. These comments thus indirectly hint at the present apathy and obliviousness of the Indian scholars towards the treasures of their own culture and literature, and recognize the contributions of Orientalists who brought out these jewels from the abyss of the past.

The phenomenal rediscovery by the Orientalists of the ancient treasures that comprised a lost Hindu Golden Age was not simply a quest of «those constant and universal principles that express the unity of human nature» as David Kopf had stated⁴⁸. Kopf, in chap. II («The Orientalist in Search of a Golden Age»), posits the Western philosophical ideas of 18th century and asserts that the cultural interaction of the Orientalists was strongly characteristic of their idea of tolerance, positive sympathy and appreciation of diversity of other cultures. Postcolonial studies have sufficiently highlighted how the politics of colonialism was based on the art of managing the assent of its subjects. Obviously, a colonial system assured its continuation and perpetuation by inducing the colonized to accept new social norms and cognitive categories. The 'psychology of colonialism', according to Ashis Nandy was assumed on «a clear disjunction between India's past and its present»⁴⁹. This disjunction in spite of its inherent contradictoriness postulated an India that had a glorious bygone past but its present was beset by degradation. The argument was that the India that Jones and other Orientalists like him appreciated was now fallen to abysmal depths. The erstwhile Mughal rule was particularly blamed for this ruin and retrogression, and the colonial rule was posited as a modern benefactor which would bring about improvement in society. Such a purpose is amply clear from Arnold's observation:

A residence in India, and close intercourse with the Hindoos, have given the Author a lively desire to subserve their advancement. No one listens now to the precipitate ignorance which would set aside as "heathenish" the high civilization of this great race; but justice is not yet done to their past development and present capacities. If the wit, the morality, and the philosophy of these "beasts of India" (so faithfully rendered by Mr. Harrison Weir) surprise any vigorous mind into further exploration of her literature,

and deeper sense of our responsibility in her government, the Author will be repaid⁵⁰.

Evidently the author's «deep sense of responsibility» spurs him for the «advancement» of the «beasts of India». It was this participatory responsibility that legitimized imperial rule and the construction of nations. It was the representation of culture through its objects and ideas by a new class of cultural 'experts' by which both producers and consumers of such culture could become citizens of the British Empire. These experts authored, shaped, supervised and pronounced categories of knowledge and forms of social identity which if adhered to would enable the heathenish 'beasts' to be included in the race of civilized beings.

The contributions of Jones and Wilkins in translating classical texts, and Baptist missionaries like William Carey and Marshman in printing vernacular dictionaries, grammar books and text books at the Serampore Press are undoubtedly valuable. Such efforts have been seen as what Kopf terms as a «Renaissance», a recovery of the forgotten literary compositions of the past, and a significant revival of the language and literature of a «Golden Age». As William Jones emphatically declared, «I am convinced that whatever changes we make in our opinions, we always return to the writings of the ancients as to the standard of true taste»⁵¹. Such a renaissance referred to a revitalization of a definite pre-Mughal period of Indian history. Historically, it implied that the Mughal period was a transitory period of medieval barbarity which saw a breakdown of traditional Hindu principles and values, and neglected the glorious culture and civilization of ancient India. This implicitly aimed to displace the supremacy of the Muslim rulers by discrediting their rule, and tried to legitimize the advent of the English rule which was seen as encouraging and reviving the glorious past of the Hindus. Wellesley too thought that his College would undo the wrongs done by the previous rulers.

In the disorder which preceded the fall of the Moghul Empire and the British conquests in India, all the public institutions calculated to promote education and good morals were neglected, and at length entirely discontinued. The institutions at Calcutta and Bunarus may be made the means of aiding the study of the laws and languages in the College at Fort William, as well as of correcting the defective moral principles too generally prevalent among the Natives in India⁵².

⁴⁷ Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels*, cit., pp. IX-X.

⁴⁸ D. Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance*, cit., pp. 22.

⁴⁹ A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1983, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels*, cit., pp. XI-XII.

⁵¹ S.N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth Century British Attitudes to India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1968, p. 44.

⁵² T. Roebuck, *Annals of the College of Fort William*, printed by Philip Pereira, Calcutta 1819, p. XXIV.

The mercantile image of the East India Company was increasingly modified and reconceived as a moral enterprise to educate and civilize the subject people. The Pious Clause of the Charter Act of 1813 was to finally confirm that «it is the Duty of this country, to promote the interests and happiness of the native inhabitants of the British dominions in India, and that such measures ought to be adopted as may tend to the introduction among them of useful knowledge, and of religious and moral improvement»⁵³. As has been often pointed out, «the ‘pious’ clause simply gave formal definition to current practice [...]»⁵⁴. The spread of moral education for the ‘improvement of the natives’ was tacitly practiced by missionaries like William Carey even before the inclusion of the Pious Act.

When the College at Fort William was set up the nature of the Company’s disagreement with Wellesley was over the purpose of the institution. Whereas Wellesley stressed the importance of Oriental teaching as a valuable tool to facilitate better administration, Charles Grant, the Director of the Board regarded Westernization as a more efficient way. Wellesley’s aim was to train the newly appointed recruits of the Company to undergo «an assimilation to Eastern opinions»⁵⁵, «in the laws and regulations and in the languages, a knowledge of which is hereby declared to be an indispensable qualification»⁵⁶. The Company regarded the College as a potential centre for the gradual evangelization of India, and much before they openly introduced this clause in the Charter of 1813, it is evident from what Charles Grant, wrote in a letter to the Rev. David Brown dated 19 June 1810, «believing the Institution to be capable of producing considerable effects, not political only but religious and moral [...]»⁵⁷. When Wellesley set about to open an ‘Oxford of the East’ and the need for school books arose, the *Hitopadesha* answered the purpose very well. It ideally served the purpose of both Wellesley who found the newly appointed Company officials «totally incompetent and ignorant of the languages, laws and usages and customs of India»⁵⁸, and Grant who was in favour of Westernization. Grant had no sympathy for Oriental learning and was critically opposed to

the teaching of Oriental literature in the college. But the canonization of such Oriental texts as important teaching manuals served very well to uplift the ‘natives’ who were considered to have ‘fallen’ from their past glory during the ‘dark period’ of pre-Muslim India⁵⁹. As William Jones had put it, «how degenerate and abased so ever the Hindus may now appear [...] in some early age they were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge»⁶⁰. Evangelism in the guise of moral tales and fables was seen as the solution to improve what was pronounced as a race of ‘degenerate and abased’ people.

The *Hitopadesha* was the book to be most frequently translated into English and Indian languages by the Fort William scholars. Apart from the two English translations by Jones and Wilkins, it was introduced by H.T. Colebrooke as «the first Sanskrit work to be published in Europe» and used as a textbook in the College. It has been claimed that «no less than ten Bengali translations appeared between 1801 and 1840»⁶¹. The following were the books directly translated or inspired by the *Hitopadesha*, published in different Indian languages by the College of Fort William:

Hitopadesha, 1802. Translated from Sanskrit to Bengali by Golaknath Sharma.

Hitopadesha, 1808. Translated from Sanskrit to Bengali by Mrityunjay Vidyalkar.

Hitopadesha, 1808. Translated from Sanskrit to Bengali by Ramkishore Tarkachuramani.

Ukhlaqi Hindee, 1803. Didactic tales from *Hitopadesha*, translated from Sanskrit to Hindustani by Mir Bahadur Ali.

Rajneeti, 1809. A translation of the *Hitopadesha* from Sanskrit to Brajbhasha by Lallujilal.

Khiraad Afroz, 1815. Translated from Persian to Hindustani by Hafizuddin Ahmad. Revised and compared as *The Illuminator of the Understanding* by Thomas Roebuck, Acting Secretary and Examiner in the College of Fort William, in two volumes.

Anvari Suhaili. Written in 15th century by Mullah Husain Waiza-khalifi. A Book of Fables in Persian printed by Major Charles Stewart in 1805⁶².

As can be seen from the recurrent translations of the *Hitopadesha*, it was the most extensively used popular textbook to impart moral lessons in the Fort William College. It functioned as a major book for didactic and moral improvement both in English and Indian languages. The *Hitopadesha*, with its simple engaging tales

⁵³ Pious Clause, Section 33, Resolution 13.

⁵⁴ A. Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2004, p. 74.

⁵⁵ S. K. Das, *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William*, Orion Publications, Calcutta 1978, p. 28.

⁵⁶ A.K. Ghosal, *Civil Service in India, under the East India Company*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta 1944, pp. 244-45.

⁵⁷ Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, cit., p. 28.

⁵⁸ Wellesley’s Minute in Council, dated 18th August, 1800 in Roebuck, *Annals of the College of Fort William*, cit. p. XX.

⁵⁹ See Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones*, cit., p. 47.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 39.

⁶¹ Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement*, cit., p. 142.

⁶² See Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, cit.

which captured the readers' attention, and a final ethical summation which highlighted the moral, was seen as an ideal model of moral instruction. The introduction to the *Hitopadesha* professes to inculcate «the doctrine of prudence and policy» and says: «As the impression made upon a new vessel are not easily to be effaced, so here youth are taught prudence through the allurements of fables»⁶³. In the Book, the King hands over the charge of his sons to the learned Pundit Vishnusharma for the «acquisition of virtue». The teacher then proceeds to impart wisdom and learning to the Princes by telling them tales of diligence, honesty, friendship and virtue. Learning is idealized as a source of all virtues, which is rewarded by worldly success, fame and victory. *Vidya* (knowledge) is considered as a benefactor, a protector from all evils.

Learning to a man is a name superior to beauty; learning is better than hidden treasure. Learning is a companion on a journey to a strange country; learning is strength inexhaustible. Learning is the source of renown, and the fountain of victory in the senate. Learning is a superior sight; learning is a livelihood; and a man in this world without learning is as a beast of the field⁶⁴.

The *Hitopadesha* was a secular version of Protestant ethics which laid stress on hard work, and moral upliftment. The didactic teachings of such books were seen as an ideal means of moral improvement also in eighteenth century England. In England at this time, the moral books written by the evangelical Martha and Hannah Moore and Sarah Trimmer were gaining prominence and were published by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in the 1790's. They used short exemplary stories in the first school books to be adopted for the poor for their moral improvement⁶⁵. Maria Edgeworth, the English educationist too suggested that the type of school books to be prescribed for children ought to be entertaining. From the late eighteenth century onwards and all through the nineteenth century 'useful knowledge' in the form of tales, parables and fables came to be regarded as a compulsory component of elementary education in order to impart the necessary distinction between vice and virtue, especially among the poor and the deprived.

It was not a mere coincidence therefore that moral pedagogy was introduced as a reformation tool to highlight and correct the moral depravity of those who had to be subjugated. Economic and social deprivation was often associated with moral decadence, and it was assumed that those who were 'superior' were obliged to reform social profligacy. Sir Edwin Arnold in the Preface to his English translation of the *Hitopadesha* asserted that it was his «residence in India, and close intercourse with the Hindoos» that gave him «a lively desire to subserve their advancement»⁶⁶. Again in his long introduction to *A Glossary* (1825), Sir Graves Chamney Haughton emphatically stated that the role and object of the newly established educational institutions was «bettering the condition of the natives»⁶⁷ and «anxious to facilitate the progress of the student, I have from time to time prepared elementary and other works filled for the purpose»⁶⁸. He fervidly eulogizes the «exquisite beauty», «the sublimity», «the appropriateness», «the profound speculations» and «the native genius» of the moral writers of Oriental Literature of India⁶⁹, and reminds those who complain of the Indians being morally degenerate that the latter have had to struggle against savage invaders, anarchy, intolerance and despotism.

Much of the evil is the inevitable effect of circumstances, that may disappear under our enlightened Indian government. It should be its object to make them act up to their own moral axioms; this is the first step to their improvement, and is well worthy of our beneficent system of legislation⁷⁰.

He further observes that should the Company officials not perform their duties zealously «she [India] will relapse into a state of anarchy and misery greater than that from which the skill and valour of the British arms have rescued her»⁷¹.

Such observations became an important determinant for the way the relationship between the colonizers and colonized were to be fashioned in the next few years and its long term resultant effect on pedagogy. The image of the colonizers was then diffused from an aggressor to that of a benefactor. The belief that the essentially virtuous Hindus' moral degeneration was due to historic circumstances and their upliftment depended

⁶³ Wilkins, *Hitopadesha*, cit., pp. 18-19.

⁶⁴ Wilkins, *Hitopadesha*, cit., p. 27.

⁶⁵ «My object is not to teach dogmas and opinions, but to form the lower classes to habits of industry and virtue» (H. and M. More, *Mendip Annals or, A Narrative of the Charitable Labours*, James Nisbet and Co., London 1859, p. 6). The effort was to make school sessions entertaining and varied. See *Hints on how to run a Sunday School*. Also see: H. More, *Christian Morals*, Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, London 1813.

⁶⁶ Arnold, *The Book of Good Counsels*, cit., «Preface», pp. X-XI.

⁶⁷ G. C. Haughton, *A Glossary, Bengali and English, to explain the Totallitias, the Batri's Singhasan, the History of Raja Krishna Chandra, the Pumsa-Parikhya, the Hitopadesa* (Translated by Mrityunjaya), Printed by Cox and Baylis, London 1825, p. X.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. XI.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. VII.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. X.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. XI.

upon the present 'enlightened' rulers, began to be more conspicuously echoed by Indian scholars and Sanskrit pundits who played pivotal roles in the introduction of such early schoolbooks. Short didactic stories and fables like the *Hitopadesha* were considered suitably adapted to Native students, and a number of school manuals were being written in that particular style⁷². By drawing on a repertoire of moral tales and parables from the classical literature of an ancient civilization, the emphasis was being laid on a sense of collective identity. The *Hitopadesha* was emblematic of a community that shared the same geographical space, customs, laws, and particular ethics and values. These were the stories, myths, tales shared by a community of people over the ages. In short, the myths and the legends bound the people together, gave them a sense of belonging and identity. As Sudipta Kaviraj puts it: «This 'themselves' of which the stories are told is constructed, partly by these stories themselves»⁷³. In a way then these stories are the emotional repertoire of a people, enabling them to be what they imagine themselves to be. Such popular shared narratives from the past have been considered to be one of the dominant factors that consolidate a community.⁷⁴ Timothy Brennan in his essay, «The National Longing for Form», too has emphasized the dependence and inseparability of the two: «Nations, then are, imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role»⁷⁵. By the time Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), one of the greatest Bengali novelists began to write, Indian vernacular literature had become a major platform for the discussion of social, intellectual and political issues. Realizing the special religious connotation that narratives from the past have for the Indians, Bankim made full use of it in his historical novels. His essays and narratives probed into the reasons for India's subjugation. He laid stress on the need to remember the past, to chronicle one's own history, of creating a mass consciousness by reviving the cultural, literal and folkloric⁷⁶. This, as Eric J. Hobsbawm sug-

gests, can be seen as the first phase of nationalism⁷⁷. As the sense of community and collective belonging became stronger in the nineteenth century, the revival and canonization of classical texts emphasized the emotional signification of the collective identity that emerges from such literary discourses. It augmented the need to counter the essentialist colonial stereotyping of Indians. It invited the members of a particular group to identify with a 'national' language and a 'national' character and persuaded them to imagine themselves as part of a larger community. Such ideologies proved successful in coalescing a group of people ostensibly divided by religion, community, caste and language. The past became a potent formative factor to stir up, discover, and shape the present. The use of the *Hitopadesha* as a school text over a period of hundred years indicate how the repertoire is moulded and shaped differently in order to answer new challenges of shared meaning and belonging.

One can see a parallel in the ways the two Indian antiquities were being presented to the world. One which appeared as 'common glass' was cut, polished and made brilliant till it shone and was ultimately appreciated by the discerning Western enlightened sensibilities. The other was a deliberate fashioning of an epistemology based on selection and translation of a particular normative 'Indian classic'. The use of the *Hitopadesha* and the showcasing of the Koh-i-noor indicate the renegotiation with the past, the ancient, and the traditional, to answer the new challenges of identity and belonging in the enlightened modern period. A glorification of the Hindu past was seen during the Nationalist Movement in India, and in a classic case of history repeating itself, can be seen in the Hindutva wave in present times. The National Central Education Board of India has as part of its 'syllabus rationalisation' exercise dropped certain portions on the Mughals from its school textbooks⁷⁸. These have been termed 'irrelevant' for modern day learners. There is a stress on a Hindu history of India and a conscious downplaying of erstwhile Muslim rulers of India. The present government is strongly advocating the use of classical languages like Sanskrit and trying to popularize ancient scriptural Indian texts. In its Vision and

⁷² Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's (1820-1891), Bengali Primer, *Barnaparichay*, and his other works like *Kathamala (Select Fables of Aesop, 1856)* and *Nitibodh (Moral Lessons, written in collaboration with Rajkrishna Bandyopadhyay in 1851)* typically indicate the strong influence of Moral Books produced in England, particularly based on William and Robert Chambers' *Moral Class Book* (1839).

⁷³ S. Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India. Politics and Ideas*, Permanent Black, Delhi 2010, pp. 104-5.

⁷⁴ See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London and New York 1983; H. K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990.

⁷⁵ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, cit., p. 49.

⁷⁶ Bankim in his essays 'Bharatbarsha paradhin keno?' (*Why is Bharatbarsha subjugated?*), 'Bangalir Kalanka' (*The Bengali's Dishonour*) and

'Bharat Kalanka' (*Bharata's Dishonour*) analyses the reasons for the subjugation of India. See B. Chatterjee, *Vividha Prabandha, Bankim Rachanabali, Part I*, Tuli Kalam, Calcutta 1986.

⁷⁷ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 12.

⁷⁸ In early 2022, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) had announced its decision to remove certain chapters on Mughal history from school textbooks. See «Why NCERT removed chapters on Mughals from history syllabus. Explained», *Livemint*, updated 5 April 2023. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/why-ncert-removed-chapters-on-mughals-from-history-syllabus-explained-11680677937093.html>. [Accessed on 11/7/2023].

Road Map, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) encouraged the use of Sanskrit as «the voice of India's soul and wisdom», a «link between India's past and present», «the vehicle of Knowledge Tradition of Bharat» whose «treasure has not been explored and applied to the extent it deserved»⁷⁹. Harnessing antiquity has and will always have a very definite agenda that revolves around composite factors like identity, hegemony and ideology.

⁷⁹ Vision and Road Map For the Development of Sanskrit Ten year Perspective Plan, Government of India, Ministry of Education. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/document-reports/Report-CVRM.pdf. [Accessed on 11/7/2023].



Citation: Fulda, D. (2025). How Activist Should Enlightenment Studies Be? Examples to Consider From Three Centuries. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 49-55. doi: 10.36253/ds-15454

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

How Activist Should Enlightenment Studies Be? Examples to Consider From Three Centuries

DANIEL FULDA

University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

Abstract. Those who pursue enlightenment want to change and shape their society. This was true for the Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century and also for many who later looked back on it, including scholars – right up to the present day. Activism can motivate efforts to gain knowledge, but it can also restrict it. The article explores this problem in a series of interlinked case studies: after a brief prelude with the Halle philosophers of the 18th century, first with the left-wing Hegelians in the 19th century and then with the Enlightenment research of the GDR, where individual prominent scholars were collaborators of the secret service, the Stasi. It concludes with reflections on how ideological constrictions can be avoided through pluralism.

Keywords: Enlightenment studies, Marxism, Political bias, Ideology.

1. WHAT DOES 'ACTIVIST' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENLIGHTENMENT' MEAN?

Semantically, an activist conception of the Enlightenment foregrounds its programme of criticism leading to reform, which indeed is a founding principle of the historical Enlightenment. Additionally, the 'pragmatics' of activism is characterized by the fact that the protagonists typically also see themselves as champions of Enlightenment and intent to contribute to the realization of the Enlightenment project by practical means, be it through writing, or political actions and public campaigning. This innate desire to have an impact derives from a view of one's own time as being not only particularly in need of Enlightenment, but also capable of progressive reform.

Enlightenment activism can be observed not only among the thinkers and actors of the eighteenth century, but also in later generations who saw parallels with their own struggles, invoked the historical idea of Enlightenment and claimed the mantle of responsibility for carrying the project forward. This tendency prevailed even in some areas of Enlightenment studies, although such activism risked blurring the boundaries between the scholar's methodical commitment to objectivity and the outcome desired by a partisan champion. I will present examples of these three activist approaches to Enlightenment.

My examples come from the German Enlightenment and its scholarly exploration because that is where I know best. I do not mean to say that Ger-

mans are particularly activist in their approaches to the Enlightenment. To be geographically accurate, the main setting of my story is Halle. This has historical reasons and at the same time gives me the opportunity to introduce you to the history of my academic home. It is a significant, but also not unproblematic heritage.

Nicolaus Hieronymus Gundling (1671–1729), the jurist, philosopher and historian at the University of Halle, represents the historical Enlightenment (see below, section 2). Arnold Ruge (1802–1880) and other Hegelians on the left wing of the political spectrum belong to a later generation. In the run-up to the revolution of 1848, they revisited the contentions of the historical Enlightenment and took upon themselves the mission to see it through to fruition (section 3). Finally, the Enlightenment research pursued in the German Democratic Republic (1949–1990) is an example of scholarly work that was never entirely devoid of political activism conducted in the service of the socialist state and the Communist Party (section 4), sometimes even becoming involved in undercover operations on behalf of the *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, the GDR's infamous state security service (section 5).

How the study of the Enlightenment came to be forged and fashioned in the GDR will be analysed in greater detail because it is closest to us in at least two respects: temporally, as very recent history, and conceptually, as it is an academic approach to the Enlightenment like our own. I will conclude with brief reflections on how activist Enlightenment research can be if it does not want to jeopardise its scientific nature. That said, the three stages analysed here show a pattern of steady intensification: from the pre-March period (i.e. preceding the March 1848 Revolution in the German Confederation) to the post-World War II era, Enlightenment activism increasingly took on the appearance of an ideology, with the activism of the GDR Enlightenment scholars proving to be the most outspoken.

2. A FIRST INVOCATION OF ENLIGHTENMENT IN 1715

One of the earliest exhibits of an Enlightenment programme is the title vignette and preface to *Gundlingiana*, Gundling's essay collection that appeared in 45 volumes from 1715 onwards. The vignette on the title page exemplifies what *Aufklärung* primarily signified around 1700, namely, the clearing up or brightening of the sky, especially as the sun breaks through the clouds (figure 1).

The explicit proclamation «*dispellam*» («I will disperse» or «I shall disperse» the clouds) sets a com-



Fig. 1. Frontispiece and title page of the *Gundlingiana*, vol. 1 (Halle 1715).

bative tone. The preface explains: «The truth is a light that enlightens everyone: it dispels all darkness: its motto, as I have had it set on the title page, is therefore “*dispellam*”¹». The anthropomorphising figure of the sun that inherently wields the power to disperse the clouds suggests that, for Gundling, the acuity of his mind represented a critical force for advancing the Enlightenment project.

As described in the preface, he sees himself partaking of and operating in a historical movement that begins with Grotius and Pufendorf, and in time attracts «many other brave men». Although in that process «the world» has become «wiser to some extent», the caveat, «[t]he dark clouds of error cannot be dissipated all at once»², suggests that in terms of both its duration and scope, Gundling understands the Enlightenment as a process of historic proportions set into motion by ‘actions’ of brave champions and not through merely waiting. Such activism, however, demands not only a high degree of self-assurance but also a combative attitude towards adversaries, at least verbally, through proclamations asserting that irrational attitudes like pedantry or superstition that oppose the truth should «finally

¹ [N. H. Gundling], *Gundlingiana, darinnen allerhand zur Jurisprudenz, Philosophie, Historie, Critic, Litteratur und übrigen Gelehrsamkeit gehörige Sachen abgehandelt werden*, Renger, Halle 1715, vol. I, *Vorrede*, non paginated [p. 4r]: «Dann die Wahrheit ist ein Licht, welches alle erleuchtet: Sie vertreibt alle Finsterniß: Ihre Devise, wie ich auf das Titelblatt setzen lassen, ist deßhalb *dispellam*.»

² [Gundling], *Gundlingiana*, cit., *Vorrede*, [p. 4v]: «Die Welt ist in einigen Stücken schon klüger als vor 100. Jahren. Die trübe Irrthums-Wolcken werden nicht auf einmahl zertheilet.»

be beaten down and kicked to the ground³». Gundling intensifies his attacks on the personal «enemies» of those championing the Enlightenment when he claims that the former will have «died of the poisonous ulcer of their envy and taken their boils with them⁴».

3. REAPPROPRIATION OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT BY THE HEGELIAN LEFT IN THE 1840S

As we see, from the very start one strand of Enlightenment thought was avowedly activist. 125 years later, its force is palpable again when the Enlightenment is powerfully invoked in Germany's pre-March 1848 era, the *Vormärz*, marking the beginning of a new phase in the history of the reception of the Enlightenment in Germany. Opponents of the Restoration sought to recover a positive view of the Enlightenment, after it had been challenged by the Romantics and religious conservatives as well as by Hegel. For the first time the Enlightenment is understood as a historical forerunner of one's own philosophical and political efforts: on the one hand, it is historicised, on the other, it is presented as excitingly ground-breaking and topical.

A sympathetic invocation of the Enlightenment in the *Vormärz* can already be found in Friedrich Christoph Schlosser's *Geschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts und des neunzehnten bis zum Sturz des französischen Kaiserreichs* (History of the 18th century and the 19th century until the fall of the French Empire), published in seven volumes between 1836 and 1848⁵. As a moderate liberal who was critical of the French *philosophes*, Schlosser saw himself as an adherent of the Enlightenment, insofar as it was not atheistically radicalised. Schlosser's understanding of the Enlightenment, however, cannot be called activist, for this Heidelberg historian saw himself as educator of a bourgeoisie defined primarily by its moral standards, not by its political activism.

Compared with that, the self-image of Arnold Ruge is shaped by a much stronger identification with the Enlightenment, and by an activist will to push ahead with the Enlightenment project. In a letter to Moritz Fleischer, a contributor to the *Rheinische Zeitung* (Rhenish Newspaper), which famously also published Karl Marx's journalistic writings, Ruge cheered: «The time

of Enlightenment is here again⁶». A few months later, Ruge, in a letter to Adolf Stahr, his co-editor for the Hegelian Lefts' most important journal *Hallische Jahrbücher* (Halle yearbooks), again put the spotlight on the present time: «Our time is the most foundational period of Enlightenment to have ever existed, rendering it necessary that we write like Voltaire and Rousseau». Ruge justifies this emphatic view of his own time by citing the political developments in «all of Europe» as indicative that the «correct interpretation of Hegel's philosophy» had finally been afforded by the Hegelian Left and the critics of the Christian faith, namely Friedrich David Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer⁷. But in his view the reactionary forces had also gained momentum: «The police are getting nasty and the opposition is already there.» Nevertheless, Ruge is convinced that he is on the right side of a historical trend that must and will prevail. To ride that wave as a writer one would have to write along the lines of «Rousseau and Sieyès», the champions of the Revolution of 1789: «These men write swords and daggers; they are more powerful than canons and bayonets.»⁸

A more elaborate justification for the parallel between then and now is rendered in a review of Schlosser's *Geschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts* in Ruge's journal, now renamed because of censorship. At the dawn of the Enlightenment, it went, the true light finally shone into the world:

Just as Christ was born during the reign of Augustus, so too was the Enlightenment during the time of the modern Augustus, Louis XIV, in order to send out its apostles all over the world under the reign of his successors. It is nothing but philosophy itself, but in a folksy, popular way, espousing people's consciousness, even world consciousness⁹.

³ *Ibidem*: «Die Pedanterey, der Aberglaube [...] muß doch endlich unten liegen, und zu Boden getreten werden.»

⁴ *Ibidem*: «Feinde [...] an dem giftigen Geschwür ihres Neides gestorben, und ihre Eiterbeulen mit sich genommen.»

⁵ See F. C. Schlosser, *Geschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts und des neunzehnten bis zum Sturz des französischen Kaiserreichs: mit besonderer Rücksicht auf geistige Bildung*, Mohr, Heidelberg 1836, vol. I, p. 3, 22, 388, 571-572, 578-579, 640.

⁶ A. Ruge's letter to M. Fleischer (23 February 1841), in *Der Redaktionsbriefwechsel der Hallischen, Deutschen und Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbücher*, ed. by M. Hundt, Akademie, Berlin 2010, vol. I, p. 688: «Die Zeit der Aufklärung ist wieder da».

⁷ Ruge's letter to A. Stahr (7 November 1841), in *Der Redaktionsbriefwechsel*, cit., vol. II, p. 864: «Unsre Zeit ist die fundamentalste Aufklärungsperiode, die es je gegeben hat, und es wird nöthig, wie Voltaire und Rousseau zu schreiben».

⁸ *Ibidem*, «Die Polizei wird eklig, und die Opposition ist es schon geworden» / «Die Entwicklung ist riesenstark» / «Die Kerle [i.e. Rousseau and Sieyès] schreiben Schwerter und Dolche, sie sind mächtiger als Kanonen und Bajonette».

⁹ [K. F. Köppen], [Review of] *Geschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts und des 19. bis zum Sturz des französischen Kaiserthums* [recte: Kaiserreichs]: von F. C. Schlosser, «Deutsche Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Kunst», 5:2-6 (1841), p. 5-7, 9-12, 13-14, 17-20, 21-23; p. 18: «Wie zur Zeit des Augustus Christus geboren wurde, so zur Zeit des modernen Augustus, Ludwig's XIV., die Aufklärung, um unter seinen Nachfolgern Apostel auszusenden in alle Welt. Sie ist nichts Anderes, als die Philosophie selbst, aber als populäre, als volksthümliche, als Volksbewußtsein, ja als

According to this Hegelian interpretation, only with the advent of the Enlightenment does humankind become conscious of what is necessary, both intellectually and historically. Just as important in the view of the Hegelian Left is the practical realisation of what is theoretically necessary: «But it [Enlightenment] still has to be realised, because it is still confronted with the enduring presence of the old monarchy and the Church»¹⁰. The French Revolution was only the «first [...] victory» of the Enlightenment, incomplete and of only limited impact, especially outside France¹¹. As the reviewer explains in an address to his readers in 1841, the interest in the eighteenth century «could not just be scholarly, historical, but also direct, practical», «since we are still completely caught up in its struggle»¹².

Much more could be said about the propensity of the pre-March 1848 radicals to parallel their own era with the previous century. Karl Friedrich Köppen, who wrote the Schlosser review¹³, dedicated an entire book to that parallel. On the face of it, the book is a eulogy for Frederick the Great in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of his accession to the throne in 1740. But packaged within Prussian patriotism is a resounding call to resume and realise the Enlightenment project, whose «intrinsic purpose» the author considers «a revolution», namely, to overthrow Christianity as well as the monarchical principle¹⁴. «Aurora rises; piercing wind blowing; but gloomy night clouds still lingering on the waters. When will we see the sun?»¹⁵ As this quote on the very first page of Köppen's book vividly demonstrates, the meteorological imagery originally accompanying the term *Aufklärung* was again taken up during the pre-March 1848 period.

Weltbewusstsein».

¹⁰ *Ibidem*: «Noch aber hat sie [die Aufklärung] sich erst zu verwirklichen, denn noch steht ihr als Positives die alte Monarchie und die Kirche gegenüber».

¹¹ *Ibidem*: «erster [...] Sieg».

¹² Ivi, p. 19: «zum achtzehnten Jahrhundert [...], das nicht bloß ein wissenschaftliches, historisches, sondern ein unmittelbares, praktisches Interesse für uns hat, da wir noch selbst ganz und gar in dessen Kampf befangen sind».

¹³ As Ruge notes in his letter to R. Prutz (9 January 1842), in *Der Redaktionsbriefwechsel*, cit., vol. II, p. 931. Köppen was one of the most active contributors to the yearbooks.

¹⁴ A passage from Köppen's Schlosser review that was abridged by the censors and that Ruge quotes in the same letter to Prutz (*ibidem*).

¹⁵ C. F. Köppen, *Friedrich der Grosse und seine Widersacher: eine Jubelschrift*, Wigand, Leipzig 1840, p. 1: «Morgenroth steigt herauf; scharfe Lüfte wehen; aber noch lagern düstre Nachtwolken auf den Gewässern. Wann werden wir die Sonne sehen?»

4. IN THE TRADITION OF THE HEGELIAN LEFT: ENLIGHTENMENT STUDIES IN THE GDR

A good one hundred years later, most GDR Enlightenment scholars agreed with the stance of the Hegelian Left on the Enlightenment in many respects, including the call for its revitalisation and the sense of superiority over less radical contemporaries or predecessors, who were cast deprecatingly as 'mere' liberals. As before, the Enlightenment was conceived as both a historical epoch and a 'mission' one sees oneself called to fulfil during one's own time, and in that sense it was both an object of study and a guiding principle¹⁶. Thus, although rooted in the feudal past, Enlightenment had lost none of its topicality¹⁷, and continued to function as a signpost to the future¹⁸.

Nevertheless, this identification with the historical Enlightenment was not entirely unqualified, either among the Hegelian Left of the 1840s, or among the Enlightenment scholars of the GDR. Both claimed to be superior and more advanced. The *Vormärz* radicals believed that they had benefited from the philosophical acuity of the Hegelian dialectic, in particular from a deeper insight into Hegel's understanding of historical necessity, an advantage the Enlightenment thinkers did not have. Scholars in the GDR shared this critique, but with an added reservation. Even as they recognised the foundational beginnings of materialistic thinking in the Enlightenment and among the Hegelian Left, they reserved their highest praise for Marx¹⁹.

¹⁶ W. Schröder et al., *Französische Aufklärung: bürgerliche Emanzipation, Literatur und Bewußtseinsbildung*, Reclam, Leipzig 1974, p. 748 (author of this part: W. Schröder).

¹⁷ See W. Bahner, *Übergreifende und spezifische Aspekte der europäischen Aufklärung (unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der romanischen Länder)*, in *Aufklärung als europäisches Phänomen: Überblick und Einzeldarstellungen*, ed. by W. Bahner, Reclam, Leipzig 1985, p. 5.

¹⁸ See [Schröder], *Französische Aufklärung*, cit., p. 672, with a quote from [Köppen], [Review of] *Geschichte*, cit., p. 5. That quote was also used by Bahner, *Übergreifende und spezifische Aspekte der europäischen Aufklärung*, cit., p. 5-110 (7).

¹⁹ See [Schröder], *Französische Aufklärung*, cit., p. 673, and the extensive criticism of the Hegelian Left in W. Krauss, *Karl Marx im Vormärz*, in W. Krauss, *Das wissenschaftliche Werk*, vol. I, *Literaturtheorie, Philosophie und Politik*, ed. by M. Naumann, de Gruyter, Berlin, Weimar 1987, p. 433-484; furthermore, with reference to Enlightenment, W. Krauss, *Die französische Aufklärung und die deutsche Geisteswelt*, in W. Krauss, *Das wissenschaftliche Werk*, vol. VII, *Aufklärung III: Deutschland und Spanien*, ed. by M. Fontius, with a note from R. Petermann and P.-V. Springborn, de Gruyter, Berlin, New York 1996, p. 231-249 (233-238). There is also a French translation of this essay: W. Krauss, *L'ère française des Lumières et les intellectuels allemands*, which appeared in the communist-influenced Parisian magazine «La Pensée», 123, 1965, p. 78-92. From a critical distance, see H. Möller, *Die Interpretation der Aufklärung in der marxistisch-leninistischen Geschichtsschreibung*, «Zeitschrift für historische Forschung», 4, 1977, p. 438-472 (441), on the propensity of GDR Enlightenment studies to refer to the Enlighten-

This blend of celebrating but in part also reproaching the Enlightenment does not represent a contradiction for the Hegelian Left or the GDR Marxists. Their progressivist concept of history both expects and demands that later epochs overcome the deficits of the earlier. In this concept, historical knowledge and the justification of one's own convictions are closely related: History is considered correctly understood when its course – as it is presented – leads up to the ideological point upheld by the historian. Of course, this line of thinking did not stem only from Enlightenment studies. In the GDR, the authoritative Marxist-Leninist worldview had pervaded the state, society and science, and it consequently underpinned the understanding of every programmatic text of the humanities. The general guideline of research was that of legitimising the state ideology; thus Enlightenment studies had to empirically prove that the progressive activists of the eighteenth century were precursors of socialism. As a result, the strain of activism that the GDR Enlightenment scholars typically espoused, in alignment with their enlightened self-image and their socialist convictions, also willy-nilly legitimised the dictatorship in which they lived and worked. Even an extremely competent and innovative scholar like Werner Krauss (1900–1976), who privately criticised the situation in the GDR²⁰, could not escape this trap.

Since socialism in the GDR had, by definition, drawn the right conclusions from the preceding course of history, the socialist order would now certainly result from the 'correctly' reconstructed history²¹. As a consequence, research was tasked with closing the circle twice: the philosophy of history would have to coincide with historical empiricism, just as all academic research had to coincide with the predefined ideology. In the GDR this applied to the humanities and the social sciences in general, but especially to Enlightenment studies, which were held in particularly high esteem. Consequently, research and scholarship were only considered successful if they aptly closed both circles. Failure to achieve this double closure spelled scientific weakness; but not attempting to do so represented an indefensible break with premises that were non-negotiable. This paved the way for a fundamentally anti-pluralistic premise to take root in GDR Enlightenment studies until 1989/1990, which meant that research could not acknowledge contingency, nor the

possibility of multiple outcomes. No ambiguity could be allowed to permeate the interpretation of the course of history, given that the 'task' of the Enlightenment was predefined. However, some changes could be observed in the 1980s. The ideological bias towards the sources gradually weakened, simple base-superstructure derivations declined and a certain degree of methodological pluralism – within the confines of the Marxist framework – came to be accepted.

5. AN ENLIGHTENMENT SCHOLAR IN THE SERVICE OF THE GDR'S STAATSSICHERHEITSDIENST

As an activist approach to Enlightenment studies in the GDR was required by the official ideology and was shaped by it, it is difficult to assess whether the commitment of particular scholars was motivated by personal conviction or merely represented the unavoidable fulfilment of a social contract. But let's take a closer look at one example: Ulrich Ricken (1926–2011), who taught French linguistics at the University of Halle for three decades. After Werner Krauss's death, he has been the GDR's most internationally renowned scholar of the Enlightenment. He also deserves the attention of ISECS because, as far as I know, he is the only GDR scholar to have been elected to the Executive Committee, which happened for the first time before the 1979 congress in Pisa, although there was no Society for the study of the 18th century in the GDR²². In 1987, after his re-election, Ricken was allowed to write a report on the Budapest congress in the «Neues Deutschland» (*New Germany*), the East-German «Prawda», and quote ISECS President Robert Darnton in praise of the «dialogue between East and West»²³. Indeed, our Society can be proud of having contributed to the détente between East and West. Ricken's personal story, however, has a dark underside.

Ricken was exceptionally active, politically and academically²⁴. In 1951, while still a student of Romance lan-

ment, while also distancing itself from it.

²⁰ See W. Krauss, *Briefe 1922 bis 1976*, ed. by P. Jehle in collaboration with E. Fillmann and P.-V. Springborn, Klostermann, Frankfurt/Main 2002, p. 648, 650, 652–53, 805, 827, 854 (1957–1967).

²¹ In Marxist terminology, Krauss explains this in his 1950 foreword to a volume of essays that was not published at the time: *Kurze Vorbemerkung über eine parteiliche Wissenschaft*, in Krauss, *Das wissenschaftliche Werk*, cit., vol. I, p. 5–6.

²² U. Ricken, *Curriculum vitae* (Lebenslauf), 16 November 1981, Member file in the archive of the Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

²³ U. Ricken, *Humanistisches Erbe aktuell befragt*, «Neues Deutschland», 8/9 August 1987, Bundesarchiv – Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv [German Federal Archives – Stasi Records Archives], Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS) [Ministry for State Security], Bezirksverwaltung (BV) Halle (Saale) [District Administration Halle Saale], Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. III, p. 211. Valuable insights into the new beginnings across the «Iron Curtain» at that time can be found in the conference report by L. Kontler, *Seventh international congress on the Enlightenment: Budapest 25th July – 2nd August, 1987*, «Danubian Historical Studies», 1, 1987, 4, p. 62–80. I would like to cordially thank László Kontler for the stimulating exchange following my talk in Rome.

²⁴ See D. Fulda, *Aufklärung(sforschung) im Sozialismus: ideologische Bedingungen und ihre Überwindung in der Gründungsphase des hal-*

guages and literatures, he wrote in his *curriculum vitae*, presumably included in his application for admission to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* – SED): «It is clear to me that we will have to revolutionise our so-called humanities to such a great extent as to allow it to fully serve a progressive development»²⁵. Party members, in particular, were expected to «actively participate», as stated in an «investigative report» of the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, for which *Staatssicherheitsdienst* or *Stasi* are common abbreviations) prior to Ricken's recruitment as so-called *Geheimer Mitarbeiter* (GM) or secret collaborator²⁶ (verbatim: «immer gesellschaftlich aktiv tätig»²⁷, or permanently socially active and involved; the pleonasm of German and foreign words here obviously suggesting greater emphasis). A GM was an undercover informer assigned to spy on people or organisations classified by the *Stasi* as hostile²⁸.

Ricken's *Stasi* files, running to more than eight hundred pages, leave no doubt about his involvement as a GM from 1959 to 1989. Initially, he operated in those capacities with prolonged interruptions; however, from 1975 onwards his involvement was permanent. Ricken had taken on that responsibility voluntarily, without any pressure or coercion, in line with his image as an active socialist²⁹. His task was to gain the trust of his French contact points, partly in France (where he had been assigned to keep an eye on persons employed at the universities he visited, including those involved in the Communist Party and GDR citizens teaching in France³⁰), partly in Halle and Berlin (where the focus was mainly on university teachers from France or the French cultural attachés³¹). While the GM reports primarily served

as information sources, their underlying purpose was to exert pressure on people who may have been potential recruits for the *Stasi*, or its opponents. Fortunately, it is arguable that Ricken's reports would probably not have served this latter purpose. As a rule, they paint a positive, even harmonious picture of the situation which he had to explore³². He rarely expressed critical assessments of third parties³³. Ricken was not a know-it-all spy seeking to harm others, that is not a true «Chekist», as his officers-in-charge noted with regret³⁴.

In Ricken's *Stasi* files, the keyword *Aufklärung* appears to mean two different things. On the one hand, it signifies the information gained through «secret intelligence gathering» about the categories of persons just mentioned³⁵. On the other hand, *Aufklärung* appears in his *Stasi* files increasingly frequently as the term we are familiar with for an epoch that remains topical, for Ricken's activities as an unofficial collaborator in the 1980s allowed him to closely pursue his academic goals in the field of Enlightenment studies. He also wrote reports on the ISECS, for example on political tensions before the 1987 congress was awarded to Hungary or the selection of participants for the first East-West young scholars' seminar held in West Berlin in 1989³⁶. Ricken's reports portray Enlightenment scholars in Western countries, and especially in France and Italy, as mostly progressive and open to the GDR, that is, as potential «political allies»³⁷. Adversaries – whose existence was inherent to

lischen Aufklärungszentrums, in *Revolution trifft Aufklärungsforschung: 1989/90 DDR-Erbe und die Gründung des hallischen Aufklärungszentrums*, ed. by D. Fulda, Mitteldeutscher Verlag, Halle 2021, p. 61-107.

²⁵ U. Ricken's *curriculum vitae*, 28 August 1951, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 22-23: «Es ist mir klar, dass wir gerade unsere sogenannten Geisteswissenschaften in besonders starkem Maße revolutionieren müssen, um sie voll einer fortschrittlichen Entwicklung dienen zu lassen».

²⁶ 10 June 1959, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 31. Unsurprisingly, SED members made up a good third of the *Stasi*'s unofficial collaborators. See J. Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police, 1945-1990*, Berghahn Books, New York 2014, p. 87.

²⁷ Information about Ricken from the District Administration Leipzig, Dept. XV, 24 June 1959, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 40.

²⁸ See Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi*, cit., p. 79.

²⁹ See MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 33 (Report on Ricken's recruitment dated 19 June 1959) and p. 68 (MfS Information about Ricken from 21 August 1965).

³⁰ See e.g. the «travel itinerary», 28 July 1959, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 46-50.

³¹ See the «Einsatz- und Entwicklungskonzeption für den IMV «Roman», 22 June 1978, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 136-38.

³² See e.g. Ricken's «Bericht über die Studienreise nach Frankreich», 14 March 1978, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. II, p. 98, or the information he provided about a French language assistant, p. 163.

³³ See the report on the meeting, 23 December 1982, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. III, p. 68.

³⁴ See «Beurteilung über IMS «Roman», 13 December 1983, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 194. Chekists are the members of the first communist secret service in the Soviet Union and were regarded by the *Stasi* as role models for ideological determination and unhesitating severity.

³⁵ MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. I, p. 43 (24 June 1959, «aufklären») and p. 123: «Perspektivplan», 8 July 1976: «Aufklärung der Pläne und Absichten der französischen Botschaft im Bereich der Kulturpolitik sowie [...] Kontrolle der Aktivitäten und Kontakte zu den an der Uni tätigen französischen Staatsbürgern»; vol. II, p. 151 («Treffbericht» of the officer-in-charge): «Aufklärung der an die Universität Lille delegierten Mitarbeiterin der MLU – [name blacked out] – Arbeits-, Lebens- und Wohnbedingungen, Umgangskreis, Verhalten»; vol. II, p. 157-58, 164-65; vol. III, p. 39, 42, 113; vol. III, p. 271, one of the targets here is the future French cultural attaché. This terminology corresponds to the official language regulations of the MfS. See S. Suckut (ed.), *Das Wörterbuch der Staatssicherheit: Definitionen zur «politisch-operativen Arbeit»*, Aufbau, Berlin 1996², p. 60-61.

³⁶ U. Ricken, *Travel report* (Reisebericht), November 1979; Id., *Travel report* (Reisebericht), 1 March 1989, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. II, p. 184; vol. I, p. 287-291.

³⁷ MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. II, p. 290-292 (9 February 1989); vol. II, p. 184-85, 189 ([1979]); vol. III, p. 116-20 (autumn 1983), the quote is from p. 120. See also Ricken's report on the joint collabora-

an activist understanding of the Enlightenment – include not only the so-called imperialist enemies of peace and détente (on the political level)³⁸ but also emergent trends in the academic field, most probably postmodernism and poststructuralism, which came to be dubbed «irrational»³⁹. In promoting Enlightenment studies in cross-bloc cooperation, Ricken puts forth the argument that this would serve to counteract a conservative relapse in the international political climate.

6. IDEOLOGY VS. PLURALISM

How much activism can Enlightenment studies endure without sacrificing academic integrity? Placing oneself in the service of a dictatorship as a secret service agent surely crosses the line; it reduces Enlightenment activism to mere self-contradiction because it replaces emancipation with subordination and criticism with the affirmation of a presupposed truth. Ricken's case represents an extreme example, although he was by no means the only unofficial collaborator among the humanities' professors in the GDR. In itself, an activist approach to one's own research topic is not necessarily problematic. Yet research is never completely value-free. Rather, it is a matter of methodically controlling and self-critically reflecting on one's own unavoidable perspective. In addition, there are still good reasons today to continue seeing the Enlightenment as a mission worthy of civic and scholarly attention, not to say activism.

A problem arises when ideological constructions of history claim that their worldview is exclusively appropriate or legitimate. By 'ideology' I mean a 'closed' worldview that pervades 'everything', especially social theory, politics, philosophy and the very concept of history⁴⁰. Marxism in the GDR incorporated a state-approved understanding of the Enlightenment, and inevitably that ideological lens was brought to bear on Enlightenment studies. As described above, Enlightenment studies had to be stretched to close the circle twice, between the philosophy of history and historical empiri-

cism on the one hand, and between research and society on the other. Given their claim to a totality, ideologies contradict the premise of pluralism on which open societies are founded, neither allowing substantial criticism nor recognising other worldviews as equal in principle. As already indicated, that is not to say that research in countries with a pluralistic democracy is free from political bias. However, ideology in the sense just defined is generally not imposed by (state) authorities in democratic societies, and it runs counter to the principle of falsification, according to which theories must be falsifiable in order to be considered scientific.

It cannot be a question of completely excluding non-scientific motives and purposes from scholarship; this is neither practically promising nor epistemologically plausible. What seems to me to be important is that the principles of research for gaining, securing and disseminating knowledge – I am only mentioning the distinction between hypotheses and observations, the awareness that all questions and observations depend on the researcher's point of view, and the argumentative solicitation of the consent of others – are applied in such a way that research, whether activist-motivated or not, can be recognised by scholars with other political premisses.

tion with Lille dated 10 December 1981, vol. III, p. 46, and 4 March 1986, vol. III, p. 160. Ricken regularly emphasises that the political attitude of his contacts in the West is «progressive».

³⁸ Cf. the report, apparently written by Ricken, about his and the rector's trips to France, December 1986, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. III, p. 180-200, esp. p. 196. Against «US nuclear missiles»: report on a trip to West Germany, undated [autumn 1983], see vol. III, p. 116-20 (119).

³⁹ Cf. Ricken's report, 10 May 1988, MfS BV Halle Abt. II VIII 1244/75, vol. III, p. 227-36 (236). Ricken never specifies what he means by «irrational currents».

⁴⁰ See H. Arendt, *Totalitarianism: part three of The Origins of totalitarianism*, Harvest, New York 1968, p. 166-169.



Citation: Grell, C. (2025). La nouvelle science et la science antique: l'échec d'un désaveu de paternité ?. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 57-69. doi: 10.36253/ds-15449

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

La nouvelle science et la science antique : l'échec d'un désaveu de paternité ?

CHANTAL GRELL

Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin, France

Abstract. One of the effects of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns and the polemics against the Ancients was to detach from the Belles Lettres the sciences and arts where the «progress of the human spirit» surely overcomes. This victory led to many protests. In the second half of the 18th century, attempts were made to reassess the contributions of the Ancients, notably Pliny and Aristotle, and the large debt owed to them.

Keywords: Anciens, Modernes, Science, Belles Lettres, Progrès, Mathématique, Physique, Histoire naturelle, Aristote, Pline.

Le terme de science n'a que progressivement reçu le sens qui est aujourd'hui le sien. A l'époque de la Renaissance, on se préoccupe de restitution des «bonnes lettres», de retour aux sources de la culture occidentale telles que les offrent les textes de l'Antiquité. La science par excellence est la philologie, la recherche des textes anciens tels qu'ils sont en eux-mêmes, dépouillés des gloses médiévales. La philologie permet d'accéder aux trésors antiques par l'étude minutieuse du vocabulaire, de la grammaire, des coutumes antiques, des institutions. Les grands savants sont alors des lettrés, comme Érasme ou Budé, peu curieux de sciences exactes. Comme Georges Sarton l'a déjà montré¹, les textes des Anciens sont étudiés pour leur valeur intrinsèque, et non pas comme témoins d'un savoir obsolète. Par la suite, les savants se sont appliqués à compléter les œuvres antiques plus qu'à les infirmer, ils ont mis leurs pas dans ceux des Anciens pour retrouver et imiter des pratiques oubliées pendant des siècles. «La Renaissance marche vers l'avenir à reculons, les yeux tournés vers les Grecs et les Latins», comme l'a écrit Robert Halleux². Puis on a critiqué ces auteurs.

A la fin du XVII^e siècle, lettres et sciences restent encore associées et lorsque Hevelius écrit travailler pour la gloire de la «République des lettres», l'astronome de Dantzic, qui observe les astres et calcule des tables, n'a certainement pas en vue la rhétorique, ni la philologie. Ce n'est

¹ G. Sarton, *The appreciation of Ancient and Medieval Science during the Renaissance, 1450-1600*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1955, pp. 4 sgg.

² R. Halleux, «Anciens» dans *La science classique: XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle. Dictionnaire critique*, sous la direction de M. Blay et R. Halleux éd., Flammarion, Paris 1998, pp. 405-406.

que très progressivement que se dessine une séparation qui n'est pas encore totalement actée dans les dictionnaires. Furetière et les académiciens donnent à *scientia* le sens latin de « connaissance », « savoir »³. Au début du XVIIIe, le mot « lettres » désigne toujours l'ensemble des sciences. Le père Lamy, dans ses *Entretiens sur les sciences* (1683) qualifie de sciences toutes les disciplines qui peuvent être objets d'enseignement. Notons, pour mémoire que l'*Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, est l'ouvrage d'une « Société de gens de lettres ». Cette imprécision du langage est source de confusion, volontaire ou non, durant la fameuse « Querelle » des Anciens et des Modernes. Le terme de « philosophie naturelle » (l'antique *philosophia naturalis*) est plus approprié pour désigner l'étude de la nature.

Le vocabulaire est trompeur. Si l'on parle aujourd'hui de « révolution scientifique » pour désigner les mutations considérables dans la connaissance du monde et des lois qui le régissent qui ont eu lieu entre Copernic et Newton en passant par Kepler et Galilée – un concept aujourd'hui contesté – force est de constater que les contemporains ne lui ont pas encore donné le sens radical que nous lui prêtons : pour Simone Mazauric, il n'y a que trois occurrences de ce type dans l'œuvre de Fontenelle – deux dans les éloges et une dans les *Éléments de la géométrie de l'infini*⁴ – où il attribue au surcroissement d'une nouveauté une « révolution », en d'autres termes, une rupture.

³ A. Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, Arnout et Reinier Leers, à la Haye et à Rotterdam 1690 ; « Science », t. III, p. 500 : « Connaissance des choses, acquise par une grande lecture ou une longue méditation. Érasme avait un grand fonds de science, de doctrine. L'Encyclopédie est la science universelle. Il y a aussi une science infuse et révélée, comme celle que le Saint Esprit répandit sur les Apostres. / Science se dit plus spécifiquement d'un art particulier, de l'application qu'on a eue à approfondir la connoissance d'une matière, de la réduire en règle et en méthode pour la perfectionner. La Philosophie comprend toutes les sciences. On définit la science dans l'École, une connaissance certaine et évidente d'une chose par ses causes. Il n'y a que la Géométrie qui soit une véritable science, qui ait des démonstrations. L'Arithmétique est la science des nombres. On appelle sciences humaines, la connaissance des Langues, de la Grammaire, de la Poésie, de la Rhétorique et autres choses qu'on apprend dans les Humanitez ». Dans le *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise* (chez Jean Baptiste Coignard, Paris 1694) l'article « Science » renvoie à « Sçavoir » (t. II, p. 447) : « Érudition, connoissance acquise par l'étude, par l'expérience » / « Savant. Qui sait beaucoup en matière d'érudition, de littérature » / « Science. Connaissance qu'on a de quelque chose. [...] signifie aussi, Connaissance certaine et évidente des choses par leurs causes [...] signifie aussi, La connaissance de toutes les choses dans lesquelles on est bien instruit. La science du monde. La science de la Cour, la science du salut ».

⁴ S. Mazauric, *Fontenelle et l'invention de l'histoire des sciences à l'aube des Lumières*, Fayard, Paris 2007, p. 215.

1. LES ANCIENS : DE FAUX GÉANTS ?

Il y eut le temps de la réappropriation des Anciens, celui de la critique et celui du dépassement avec le bilan de toutes les découvertes, des nouveautés et des inventions (les *nova reperta*) qui conduisent à réévaluer l'apport des Modernes.

Antianus (*Ancianus*) désigne en latin les nobles qui en âge, en autorité et en honneur, ont préséance sur le reste des habitants et par là-même sur les magistrats eux-mêmes⁵. Le terme, noble, désigne les gens d'âge, d'expérience. Le terme « ancien », par un glissement sémantique, appliqué aux âges de la vie, va désigner les Modernes. Francis Bacon, dans le *Novum Organum* (1620), fait de l'antiquité le temps de la jeunesse et du présent, celui de la vieillesse :

Quant à l'Antiquité, l'opinion que les hommes s'en forment est tout à fait superficielle et ne s'accorde guère avec le mot lui-même. C'est en effet la vieillesse et le grand âge du monde qui doivent être tenus pour la véritable Antiquité ; et il faut les attribuer à notre époque, non à l'âge plus jeune du monde, qui fut celui des Anciens. Car cet âge qui par rapport à nous est le plus ancien et le plus avancé, fut par rapport au monde lui-même le plus nouveau et le plus précocé⁶.

Pascal développe le même thème dans le *Fragment de préface pour un Traité du vide* :

Ceux que nous appelons Anciens étaient véritablement nouveaux en toutes choses, et formaient l'enfance des hommes proprement ; et comme nous avons joint à leurs connaissances l'expérience des siècles qui les ont suivis, c'est en nous que l'on peut trouver cette Antiquité que nous révérons dans les autres. Ils doivent être admirés dans les conséquences qu'ils ont bien tirées du peu de principes qu'ils avaient, et ils doivent être excusés dans celles où ils ont plutôt manqué du bonheur de l'expérience que de la force du raisonnement⁷.

Cette posture présente le grand avantage d'affranchir de l'autorité des Anciens tout en mettant l'accent sur l'accroissement des connaissances (*de Augmentis scientiarum*). Si Bacon n'admire pas plus les thuriféraires de

⁵ C. Du Cange, *Glossarium mediæ et infimæ latinitatis*, éd. L. Favre, Niort 1883-1887, t. I, p. 298 : « Antiani, apud Genuenses, et in aliquot Italiae oppidis, dicti Patricii, Nobiles, qui ætate, auctoritate et honore cæteros incolas præcellunt, atque adeo ipsi magistratus ». Ivi, p. 242 : « Anciani, ut infra Antiani, Primores quarumdam urbium, præsertim Italiae Patricii, Nobiles ». Ante en latin signifie « avant » et « devant ».

⁶ F. Bacon, *Novum Organum*, introduction, traduction et notes par M. Malherbe et J.-M. Pousseur, PUF, Paris 1986, par. 84, p. 144.

⁷ B. Pascal, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. établie et annotée par J. Chevalier, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris 1969, p. 534.

l'Antiquité que ceux qui sont enfiévrés de nouveauté et préconise la mesure, pour Pascal, l'admiration aveugle pour les Anciens est un obstacle. Pascal enfant, à qui son père interdisait l'étude de la géométrie, avait, avec des ronds et des barres, retrouvé la 32^e proposition d'Euclide⁸. Cette expérience a nourri peut-être sa prévention à l'encontre du « génie » des Anciens. Dans le *Fragment de préface pour un Traité du vide*, daté de 1647⁹, il énumère tous les domaines où les Modernes les ont surpassés et juge hors de propos la révérence qu'on continue de leur porter :

Le respect que l'on porte à l'Antiquité étant aujourd'hui à tel point, dans les matières où il doit avoir moins de force, que l'on se fait des oracles de toutes ses pensées et des mystères même de ses obscurités ; que l'on ne peut plus avancer de nouveautés sans péril, et que le texte d'un auteur suffit pour détruire les plus fortes raisons ... Ce n'est pas que mon intention soit de corriger un vice par un autre, et de ne faire nulle estime des Anciens, parce que l'on en fait trop. Je ne prétends pas bannir leur autorité pour relever le raisonnement tout seul, quoique l'on veuille établir leur autorité seule au préjudice du raisonnement ...

[...] C'est ainsi que la géométrie, l'arithmétique, la musique, la physique, la médecine, l'architecture et toutes les sciences qui sont soumises à l'expérience et au raisonnement, doivent être augmentées pour devenir parfaites. Les Anciens les ont trouvées seulement ébauchées par ceux qui les ont précédés ; et nous les laisserons à ceux qui viendront après nous en un état plus accompli que nous les avons reçues [...] Cependant il est étrange de quelle sorte on révère leurs sentiments. On fait un crime de les contredire et un attentat d'y ajouter, comme s'ils n'avaient plus laissé de vérités à connaître¹⁰.

La radicalité de Pascal ne fait toutefois pas l'unanimité. Newton, qui a beaucoup étudié les Anciens pour ses recherches sur la chronologie mais pas seulement, écrit à Robert Hooke dans une lettre du 5 février 1675 : « If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants » (« Si j'ai vu plus loin, c'est en me tenant sur les épaules de géants »)¹¹. Qu'il ait même été très admiratif à

leur égard, Francis Atterbury, évêque de Rochester (1663-1732) l'atteste dans une lettre à Tiriot :

La modestie nous apprend à parler et penser avec respect au sujet des Anciens, surtout quand nous ne connaissons pas parfaitement leurs ouvrages. Newton, qui les savait presque par cœur, avait pour eux le plus grand respect et les regardait comme des hommes d'un grand génie, d'un esprit supérieur, qui avaient porté leurs découvertes en tout genre beaucoup plus loin qu'il ne nous paraît à présent par ce qui nous reste de leurs écrits. Il y a plus d'ouvrages des Anciens de perdus que nous en avons conservés ; et peut-être nos nouvelles découvertes ne valent-elles pas nos anciennes pertes¹².

La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes souligne le sentiment croissant d'une discordance entre la situation réelle du savoir, où les sciences occupent une place de plus en plus importante, et l'ordre officiel de la culture qui perpétue la prépondérance périmée des Belles Lettres. Ce décalage permet de dénoncer l'opposition, voire l'incompatibilité entre l'approche érudite et philologique et le principe d'autorité qui continuent de peser sur les sciences, et les nouvelles méthodes qui conjuguent expériences et observations et favorisent l'invention, l'innovation, l'accélération des découvertes induisant un nouveau rapport au temps :

Mais les choses ont bien changé de face. L'orgueilleux désir de paraître Savant par des citations a fait place au désir sage de l'être en effet par la connaissance immédiate des ouvrages de la nature [... qui a] révélé un nombre infini de mystères qu'elle avait tenus cachés aux plus sages des Anciens [...] Depuis vingt ou trente ans, il s'est fait plus de découvertes dans la science des choses naturelles que dans toute l'étendue de la savante Antiquité¹³.

Le ton de Charles Perrault est résolu, qui recourt à des procédés rhétoriques, par la suite usuels, qui opposent un avant et un après, autrefois et le présent. Au tome IV, l'abbé affirme :

Mon dessein n'est pas de faire voir simplement que nous l'emportons sur les Anciens, mais de combien nous l'emportons et par quels degrés tous les arts et toutes les sciences, de faibles et d'imparfaites qu'elles étaient chez les Anciens, sont parvenus au point de perfection où elles sont aujourd'hui parmi les Modernes¹⁴.

⁸ Adrien Baillet, *Enfants célèbres par leurs études* dans *Jugements des savants sur les principaux ouvrages des auteurs*, éd. de la Monnoye, Paris (Charles Moette, Ch. Le Clerc, Pierre Morisset, P. Prault, Jacques Chardon, 1722, in-4°, VI, p. 152.

⁹ C'est la date de ce fragment selon J. Chevalier (Pascal, *Œuvres complètes*, cit., p. 529).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 529, 531, 533.

¹¹ R. Halleux, « Anciens » dans *La science classique*, cit., p. 410 : « par bien des intermédiaires, la comparaison remonte à Bernard de Chartres († vers 1125) qui, selon Jean de Salisbury († 1180) avait dit que nous sommes juchés sur des épaules de géants de sorte que nous pouvons voir plus de choses qu'eux et plus loin, non parce que notre vue est plus perçante et notre taille plus haute, mais parce que nous pouvons nous

élever plus haut grâce à leur stature de géants ».

¹² Citée par L. Dutens, *Origine des découvertes attribuées aux Modernes*, Paris, 1776, chez la Veuve Duchesne, t. II, p. 354-355 (note 2).

¹³ C. Perrault, *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes*, chez Jean Baptiste Coignard, Paris, 1688, t. I, p. 96-97.

¹⁴ Id., *Parallèle*, cit., t. IV, chez Jean Baptiste Coignard, Paris 1697, p. 17.

Dans la balance, la supériorité des Modernes est désormais acquise et nul ne s'avise de la contester après Fontenelle, secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie des sciences entre 1699 et 1740 et partisan des Modernes¹⁵, qui fixe dans ses éloges académiques la stature du grand savant et expose dans divers écrits, comme la *Préface des Éléments de géométrie de l'infini*, combien il a fallu de temps aux Modernes pour comprendre les Anciens, ce qui était assez difficile, avant qu'ils puissent s'en affranchir. Même dans un domaine où les démonstrations des Anciens restent pertinentes, il est des avancées sensibles :

Quand une science telle que la géométrie ne fait que de naître, on ne peut guère attraper que des vérités dispersées qui ne se tiennent point et on les prouve à part comme l'on peut, et presque toujours avec beaucoup d'embarras. Mais quand un certain nombre de ces vérités désunies ont été trouvées, on voit en quoi elles s'accordent, et les principes généraux commencent à se montrer, non pas encore les plus généraux ou les premiers ; il faut encore un plus grand nombre de vérités pour les forcer à paraître. Plusieurs petites branches que l'on tient d'abord séparément mènent à la grosse branche qui les produit, et plusieurs grosses branches mènent enfin au tronc¹⁶.

Dans sa *Préface sur l'utilité des mathématiques et de la physique et sur les travaux de l'Académie des sciences*, Fontenelle estime même que les sciences ne font que naître en son temps :

Il est permis de compter que les Sciences ne font que de naître, soit parce que chez les Anciens elles ne pouvaient être encore qu'assez imparfaites, soit parce que nous en avons perdu presque entièrement perdu les traces pendant les longues ténèbres de la Barbarie, soit parce qu'on ne s'est mis sur les bonnes voies que depuis environ un siècle. Si l'on examinait historiquement le chemin qu'elles ont déjà fait, dans un si petit espace de temps, malgré les faux préjugés qu'elles ont eus à combattre de toutes parts, et qui leur ont longtemps résisté, quelquefois même malgré les obstacles étrangers de l'autorité et de la puissance, malgré le peu d'ardeur que l'on a eu pour des connaissances éloignées de l'usage commun, malgré le petit nombre de personnes qui se sont dévouées à ce travail, malgré la faiblesse des motifs qui les y ont engagées, on serait étonné de la grandeur et de la rapidité du progrès des Sciences, on en verra même de toutes nouvelles formes sortir du néant et peut-être laisserait-on aller trop loin ses espérances pour l'avenir¹⁷.

¹⁵ Voir Mazaauric, *Fontenelle et l'invention de l'histoire des sciences*, cit.

¹⁶ B. Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Œuvres complètes*, Fayard, Paris 1996, t. VII, p. 371

¹⁷ B. Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Œuvres diverses de M. de Fontenelle*, chez Gosse et Neaulme, La Haye 1729, t. III, p. 9.

Pour Fontenelle, il n'existe pas 'une' science moderne, mais chaque science est un cas spécifique ; et s'il y a un mouvement général de clarification et une histoire globale des progrès de l'esprit humain, chaque branche du savoir a ses pratiques, ses hésitations, ses rythmes, ses méthodes, ses traditions et donc son autonomie. Les mathématiques et le calcul infinitésimal constituent, à ses yeux, un cas exemplaire¹⁸ comme il le montre à l'occasion du mémoire de Varignon sur « les spirales à l'infini » :

C'est là le grand avantage des Géomètres modernes sur les Anciens. Un nombre de vérités infiniment plus grand nous coûte infiniment moins, non que nous ayons un génie supérieur, mais parce que nous avons d'excellentes méthodes. La gloire des Anciens est d'avoir pu faire sans le secours de notre art, le peu qu'ils ont fait ; et la gloire des Modernes est d'avoir trouvé un art si merveilleux¹⁹.

La *Préface de l'Histoire de l'Académie des sciences entre 1666 et 1699* décrit la puissance de l'alliance nouvelle des mathématiques et de la physique qui se fécondent l'une l'autre, sans pour autant toucher, loin s'en faut, l'ensemble des savoirs²⁰.

A la suite de la Querelle, les sciences, dans les premières décennies du XVIII^e siècle, se désolidarisent des lettres pour former un domaine à part qui trouve sa légitimation dans l'histoire. Mais elles ne forment pas un bloc et il convient de distinguer les différentes branches des sciences.

2. HISTOIRE DES SCIENCES ET « PROGRÈS DE L'ESPRIT HUMAIN »

Pour Jean Dagen, l'idée de progrès s'impose dans le domaine des sciences :

Le concept d'histoire de l'esprit humain apparaît comme solidaire de celui d'histoire des sciences. D'une part, il

¹⁸ Mazaauric, *Fontenelle*, cit., chap. IX : *L'histoire des mathématiques dans l'œuvre de Fontenelle* ; S. Séguin, *Anciens et Modernes à l'Académie des Sciences*, dans *Anciens et Modernes face aux pouvoirs. L'Église, le Roi, les Académies*, sous la direction de C. Bahier-Porte et D. Reguig, Champion, Paris 2022, pp. 179-195.

¹⁹ *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences, année 1704... avec les mémoires de mathématiques et de physique... tirés des registres de cette Académie*, chez Gabriel Martin, Jean-Baptiste Coignard, et Hippolyte-Louis Guérin, Paris 1745, p. 53.

²⁰ « La science moderne n'existe pas comme un progrès unique axé sur quelques grands principes physiques enfin fixés par quelques grands génies. Fontenelle, partisan des Modernes, n'est cependant pas un penseur du progrès scientifique, mais des progrès des sciences qui, tout en étant situées dans l'horizon global de la modernité ont chacune leurs modalités de progression », (F. Pépin, *Fontenelle premier représentant d'une tradition française d'épistémologie historique*, « Dix-Huitième Siècle », 44, 2012, pp. 381-398 : 392).

n'est guère d'historien des sciences qui n'ouvre l'histoire de sa discipline sur celle de l'esprit humain ; d'autre part, l'histoire de l'esprit humain imposant et généralisant le concept d'histoire, fait un devoir à tout spécialiste d'adopter aussi... une perspective historique²¹.

Domaine de l'excellence des Modernes, les mathématiques, les premières, font l'objet d'une mise en perspective historique. Elles sont même un 'modèle' pour l'histoire de l'esprit humain car l'accroissement des connaissances n'y est jamais suspendu et l'on n'y voit pas de régressions.

En 1716, Pierre Raymond de Montmort (1678-1719) expose un projet dans une lettre à Bernoulli :

Il serait fort à souhaiter [...] que quelqu'un voulût prendre la peine de nous apprendre comment et en quel ordre les découvertes Mathématiques se sont succédé les unes aux autres, et à qui nous en avons l'obligation. [...] Quel plaisir n'aurait-on pas à voir la liaison des méthodes, l'enchaînement des diverses théories, à commencer depuis les premiers temps jusqu'au nôtre où cette science se trouve portée à un si haut degré²².

Montucla lui donne forme en 1758 dans son *Histoire des mathématiques dans laquelle on rend compte de leurs progrès depuis leur origine jusqu'à nos jours ; où l'on expose le tableau et le développement des principales découvertes, les contestations qu'elles ont fait naître, et les principaux traits de la vie des mathématiciens les plus célèbres*²³. Alors qu'au XVIII^e siècle, l'étude des mathématiciens antiques (Euclide, Diophante, Archimède) avait été une source d'inspiration créatrice, la perspective de l'histoire des mathématiques fige l'Antiquité dans un statut d'enfance. Jean-Étienne Montucla (1725-1799), ancien élève des jésuites²⁴ et excellent hellénisant et latiniste au

demeurant, reconnaît qu'en matière de mathématiques pures, les Anciens excellèrent, mais qu'ils développèrent peu les mathématiques mixtes – les disciplines d'application, mathématisées ou mathématisables :

On ne doit pas s'étonner que les Mathématiques mixtes n'aient fait que des progrès lents et peu assurés parmi les Anciens, tandis que les abstraites s'accrurent rapidement chez eux d'un grand nombre de découvertes. L'esprit humain n'a qu'à rentrer en lui-même pour avancer dans celles-ci, mais les autres demandent une marche presque contraire ; elles exigent des amas de faits, d'observations : et ce fut là l'écueil de l'Antiquité. En général, on y observa trop peu ; on donna trop au raisonnement et à la métaphysique, tandis qu'il ne fallait encore s'attacher qu'à voir et à observer avec exactitude. Excités par une curiosité impatiente, et après tout fort excusable, les Anciens voulurent expliquer la nature avant que d'avoir seulement reconnu ses premières démarches : aussi l'édifice qu'ils élevèrent, semblable à celui que d'imprudents architectes établiraient sur un fond sans consistance, s'écroula-t-il bientôt.

[...] Il ne paraît pas qu'ils aient établi aucun fait capable de servir de principe à une nouvelle science, si nous en exceptons peut-être la propagation rectiligne de la lumière, et l'égalité des angles d'incidence et de réflexion. Quoi qu'il en soit, l'Optique et la Mécanique semblent n'avoir été qu'assez tard comptées parmi les Mathématiques ; cela arriva seulement vers le temps d'Aristote, lorsqu'on eut enfin démêlé quelques-unes des lois de la propagation de la lumière, de la vision et de l'équilibre. Les questions mécaniques de ce Philosophe, quelques-uns de ses problèmes et le Traité d'optique attribué à Euclide, semblent être les premières ébauches de ces sciences. Le système général des Mathématiques fut alors composé de six parties, la Géométrie et l'Arithmétique, la Musique et l'Astronomie, l'Optique et la Mécanique. Il ne s'accrut pas davantage chez les Anciens²⁵.

Dans la logique de l'histoire des progrès de l'esprit humain, les Anciens ne peuvent jamais apparaître à leur avantage pour ce qui tient aux sciences. Le juriste Antoine-Yves Goguet (1715-1758) conclut ainsi son ouvrage – *De l'Origine des loix, des arts et des sciences et de leurs progrès chez les anciens peuples*²⁶ – qui paraît la même année que celui de Montucla :

Les Grecs étaient encore fort ignorants du temps de Cyrus [...] Il s'est écoulé près de deux siècles [...] jusqu'au

²¹ J. Dagen, *L'histoire de l'esprit humain dans la pensée française de Fontenelle à Condorcet*, Klincksieck, Paris 1977, p. 56.

²² Cité par J.-E. Montucla, *Histoire des mathématiques, dans laquelle on rend compte de leurs progrès depuis leurs origines jusqu'à nos jours*, chez Ch.-Ant. Jombert, Paris 1758, t. I, « Préface », p. VIII.

²³ Le volume I traite des mathématiques grecques, romaines et orientales ; le II, de la géométrie, de la mécanique, de l'optique jusqu'au XVIII^e siècle. Selon George Sarton, cette histoire n'est pas seulement une histoire des mathématiques, « and might almost be called a history of science from the mathematical angle, even as many histories of medicine are to some extent histories of science written from the medical angle », (G. Sarton, *Jean-Etienne Montucla (1725-1799). His life and works*, « Osiris », I, 1936, pp. 519-567). Jérôme Lalande en fit, après sa mort, une réédition augmentée de 2 volumes : *Histoire des mathématiques : dans laquelle on rend compte de leurs progrès depuis leur origine jusqu'à nos jours*, par J.-E. Montucla. Nouvelle édition considérablement augmentée et prolongée jusqu'à l'époque actuelle, Henri Agasse, Paris an VII [1798]-an X (1802). Montucla ne fut reçu à l'Académie des sciences qu'en 1796 (ventôse an IV).

²⁴ Mais il prit la défense de d'Alembert, dont l'article « Collège » fut attaqué par le Père Tolomas. Montucla était lié à d'Alembert, Diderot et

Turgot.

²⁵ Montucla, *Histoire des mathématiques*, cit., t. I, pp. 6-7.

²⁶ Cet ouvrage porte sur le droit, les arts et les sciences avant Rome et met l'accent sur l'ethnographie. Il connut un certain succès : il fut traduit en italien et en anglais en 1775 (et Gibbon l'apprécia) en allemand en 1796, et réédité en France en 1778 et 1809. Sur Goguet voir Nathaniel Wolloch, *Facts and Conjectures. Antoine Yves Goguet's historiography*, « Journal of the History of Ideas », 68-3, 2007, pp. 429-449.

temps où les Grecs ont fait la plupart des découvertes qui leur ont mérité cette gloire et cette juste estime, dont ils jouissent encore aujourd'hui, et que rien ne pourra jamais leur enlever. Personne ne les a encore surpassé dans la poésie, dans l'éloquence, ni dans l'art d'écrire l'histoire. Il n'en est pas tout à fait de même des Sciences exactes, ni même de plusieurs parties des Arts²⁷.

En effet, les Anciens

n'ont jamais pu s'élever au-delà d'un certain terme, faute d'avoir su se procurer plusieurs des secours absolument nécessaires aux progrès des Sciences [...]. Ils n'avaient, par exemple, ni pendules, ni lunettes, ni, en un mot, plusieurs des instruments sans lesquels l'Astronomie et la Géographie ne peuvent acquérir absolument aucune espèce de précision. Les anciens peuples manquaient même des moyens les plus ordinaires et les plus indispensables pour constater leurs découvertes [...] A l'égard de la physique et de l'histoire naturelle, on sait qu'elles ont été presque entièrement inconnues aux anciens peuples²⁸.

On peut dater du second tiers du XVIII^e siècle la généralisation, dans l'opinion éclairée, d'une sensibilité intellectuelle qui oppose lettres et sciences, accordant aux sciences la prééminence du fait de leurs applications techniques utiles qui permettent d'améliorer les conditions d'existence de l'homme sur la terre. Sciences et arts vont désormais de pair, tandis que l'érudition perd en prestige et en autorité.

Condorcet (1743-1794) dans son *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, rédigée dans les derniers mois de son existence, dresse un bilan de la science grecque dans les 4^e et 5^e périodes. La 4^e, « Progrès de l'esprit humain dans la Grèce jusqu'au temps de la division des sciences vers le règne d'Alexandre », est illustrée par Démocrite et Pythagore.

Une des premières bases de toute bonne philosophie, est de former pour chaque science une langue exacte et précise, où chaque signe représente une idée bien déterminée, bien circonscrite, et de parvenir à bien déterminer, à bien circonscrire les idées par une analyse rigoureuse.

Les Grecs, au contraire, abusèrent des vices de la langue commune, pour jouer sur le sens des mots, pour embarrasser l'esprit dans de misérables équivoques, pour l'égarer, en exprimant successivement par un même signe des idées différentes. Cette subtilité donnait cependant de la finesse aux esprits, en même temps qu'elle épuisait leur force contre de chimériques difficultés. Ainsi cette philosophie de mots, en remplissant des espaces où la raison

humaine semble s'arrêter devant quelque obstacle supérieur à ses forces, ne sert point immédiatement à ses progrès; mais elle les prépare [...] C'était en s'attachant à des questions peut-être à jamais inaccessibles, en se laissant séduire par l'importance ou la grandeur des objets, sans songer si l'on aurait les moyens d'y atteindre; c'est en voulant établir les théories avant d'avoir rassemblé des faits, et construire l'univers quand on ne savait pas même l'observer; c'était une erreur alors bien excusable, qui, dès les premiers pas, avait arrêté la marche de la philosophie²⁹.

Ce n'est que dans la 5^e période que les sciences s'épanouissent, sous l'égide de Platon et d'Aristote. C'est l'époque d'Archimède « le créateur de la mécanique rationnelle ». C'est dans l'école d'Alexandrie où

nous trouvons les premières traces de l'algèbre, c'est-à-dire du calcul des quantités considérées uniquement comme telles. La nature des questions proposées et résolues dans le livre de Diophante, exigeait que les nombres y fussent envisagés comme ayant une valeur générale, indéterminée et assujettie seulement à certaines conditions.

Mais cette science n'avait point alors, comme aujourd'hui, ses signes, ses méthodes propres, ses opérations techniques. [...] C'était par une suite de raisonnements que l'on parvenait à trouver, à développer la solution des problèmes³⁰.

L'astronomie est alors illustrée par Hipparque :

Mais si après lui, dans l'astronomie, comme après Archimède dans la géométrie et dans la mécanique, on ne trouve plus de ces découvertes, de ces travaux qui changent en quelque sorte la face entière d'une science, elles continuèrent longtemps de se perfectionner, de s'étendre et de s'enrichir, du moins par des vérités de détail³¹.

Dans son histoire des animaux, Aristote avait donné les principes et le modèle précieux de la manière d'observer avec exactitude, et de décrire avec méthode les objets de la nature, de classer ces observations, et de saisir les résultats généraux qu'elles présentent. L'histoire des plantes, celle des minéraux, furent traitées après lui, mais avec moins de précision et avec des vues moins étendues, moins philosophiques.

Les progrès de l'anatomie furent très lents [...]. La médecine d'Hippocrate n'était qu'une science d'observation, qui n'avoit pu conduire encore qu'à des méthodes empiriques. L'esprit de secte, le goût des hypothèses l'infesta bientôt [...].

²⁷ A.-Y. Goguet, *De l'Origine des loix, des arts et des sciences et de leurs progrès chez les anciens peuples*, chez Desaint et Saillant, Paris 1758, in-4^o, t. III, p. 246.

²⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 244-245.

²⁹ J.-A. Caritat de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, chez Masson et fils, Paris 1822, pp. 64-65. Dans la vaste bibliographie concernant Condorcet on retiendra : K.M. Baker, *Condorcet, raison et politique*, Hermann, Paris 1988 ; *Condorcet, homme des Lumières et de la Révolution*, textes recueillis par A.-M. Chouillet et P. Crépel, ENS éd., Lyon 1997.

³⁰ Condorcet, *Esquisse*, cit., p. 85

³¹ *Ibidem*.

Aristote ne porta dans la physique, ni cette exactitude, ni cette sage réserve qui caractérisent son histoire des animaux. Il paya le tribut aux habitudes de son siècle, à l'esprit des écoles, en la défigurant par ces principes hypothétiques qui, dans leur généralité vague, expliquent tout avec une sorte de facilité, parce qu'ils ne peuvent rien expliquer avec précision.

D'ailleurs, l'observation seule ne suffit pas; il faut des expériences: elles exigent des instruments; et il paraît qu'on n'avait pas alors assez recueilli de faits, qu'on ne les avait pas vus avec assez de détails, pour avoir l'idée de cette manière d'interroger la nature et de la forcer à nous répondre³².

Antoine Laurent de Lavoisier (1743-1794) tient de semblables propos à propos de la chimie. Il refuse les quatre éléments d'Aristote et estime même qu'ils continuent de constituer de son temps un obstacle à tout progrès de cette science:

L'admission des quatre éléments qui, par la variété de leurs proportions, composent tous les corps que nous connaissons, est une pure hypothèse imaginée long temps avant qu'on eût les premières notions de la Physique expérimentale et de la Chimie. On n'avait point encore de faits, et l'on formait des systèmes; et aujourd'hui que nous avons rassemblé des faits, il semble que nous nous efforcions de les repousser, quand ils ne cadrent pas avec nos préjugés: tant il est vrai que le poids de l'autorité de ces pères de la philosophie humaine se fait encore sentir et qu'elle pèsera sans doute encore sur les générations à venir³³.

Tel est le legs de la science antique: des débuts, des balbutiements, parfois un peu plus. Les discours qui soulignent les grands progrès – le terme est à présent devenu commun – réalisés et qui condamnent l'autorité des Anciens semblent faire l'unanimité. Ces derniers n'ont pas dit leur dernier mot.

3. LES ANCIENS N'ONT-ILS RIEN À NOUS APPRENDRE ?

Si le discours 'progressiste' nous est familier (décliné aujourd'hui jusqu'à la nausée, sans le moindre soupçon d'esprit critique), d'autres voix se sont fait entendre,

et non des moindres. «C'est être ignorant ou présomptueux de croire [...] que nous n'ayons plus aucun avantage à tirer de l'étude et de la lecture des Anciens» écrit en 1751 d'Alembert dans le *Discours préliminaire* de l'*Encyclopédie*. Et de citer Buffon «le rival de Platon et de Lucrèce» (p. XXI). Deux ans auparavant, Buffon a publié le premier volume de son *Histoire naturelle*.

Aux progressistes qui estiment que les Anciens n'ont pas grand-chose à apprendre aux Modernes, Buffon rétorque qu'ils peuvent avoir tort³⁴:

On reproche aux Anciens de n'avoir pas fait des méthodes, et les Modernes se croient fort au-dessus d'eux parce qu'ils ont fait un grand nombre de ces arrangements méthodiques et de ces dictionnaires [...], ils se sont persuadés que cela seul suffit pour prouver que les Anciens n'avaient pas à beaucoup près autant de connaissances en histoire naturelle que nous en avons; cependant c'est tout le contraire, et nous aurons dans la suite de cet ouvrage mille occasions de prouver que les Anciens étaient beaucoup plus avancés et plus instruits que nous ne le sommes, je ne dis pas en physique, mais dans l'histoire naturelle des animaux et des minéraux, et que les faits de cette histoire leur étaient bien plus familiers qu'à nous qui aurions dû profiter de leurs découvertes et de leurs remarques³⁵.

Et de poursuivre:

D'ailleurs les Anciens qui ont écrit sur l'histoire naturelle étaient de grands hommes et qui ne s'étaient pas bornés à cette seule étude; ils avaient l'esprit élevé, des connaissances variées, approfondies et des vues générales, et s'il nous paraît au premier coup d'œil qu'il leur manquât un peu d'exactitude dans certains détails, il est aisé de reconnaître, en les lisant avec réflexion, qu'ils ne pensaient pas que les petites choses méritassent une attention aussi grande que celle qu'on leur a donnée dans ces derniers temps; et quelque reproche que les modernes puissent faire aux Anciens, il me paraît que Aristote, Théophraste et Plinie qui ont été les premiers naturalistes, sont aussi les plus grands à certains égards. *L'Histoire des animaux* d'Aristote est peut-être encore aujourd'hui ce que nous avons de mieux fait en ce genre, et il serait fort à désirer qu'il nous eût laissé quelque chose d'aussi complet sur les végétaux et sur les minéraux [...]. Il est vrai que la botanique n'était pas fort en honneur de son temps: les Grecs,

³² Ivi, pp. 86-87.

³³ A.-L. de Lavoisier, *Traité élémentaire de chimie, présenté dans un ordre nouveau et d'après les découvertes modernes*, chez Cuchet, Paris 1789, t. I; «Discours préliminaire», p. XV. Sur Lavoisier voir M. Beretta, *The Enlightenment of matter. The definition of Chemistry from Agricola to Lavoisier*, Science History Publications, Uppsala 1993; Id., *A new Course in Chemistry. Lavoisier's first chemical Paper*, Olshki, Firenze 1994; Id., «Lavoisier», dans *La science classique: XVIe-XVIIIe siècle. Dictionnaire critique*, cit., pp.317-326.

³⁴ Voir J. Roger, Buffon, Fayard, Paris 1989, qui souligne, dans la démarche de Buffon, la rupture entre science et religion qui le conduit à présenter son *Histoire naturelle* comme la première «vraiment naturelle» depuis celle de Plinie (p. 247).

³⁵ *Œuvres philosophiques de Buffon*, Texte établi et présenté par J. Piveteau, PUF (Corpus général des philosophes français, t. XLI-1), PUF, Paris 1954, pp.19-20, (voir J.-L. Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, de l'Imprimerie Royale, Paris 1749; «Premier discours: de la manière d'étudier et de traiter l'histoire naturelle», 1749, t. I, pp. 3-62).

et même les Romains, ne la regardaient pas comme une science qui dût exister par elle-même et qui dût faire un objet à part, ils ne la considéraient que relativement à l'agriculture, au jardinage, à la médecine et aux arts, et quoique Théophraste disciple d'Aristote connût plus de cinq cents genres de plantes et que Pline en cite plus de mille, ils n'en parlent que pour nous en apprendre la culture, ou pour nous dire que quelques-unes entrent dans la composition des drogues [...] et ils ne se sont pas attachés à les décrire exactement³⁶.

S'ensuit une apologie de Pline :

Son *Histoire naturelle* comprend, indépendamment de l'histoire des animaux, des plantes et des minéraux, l'histoire du ciel et de la terre, la médecine, le commerce, la navigation, l'histoire des arts libéraux et mécaniques, l'origine des usages, enfin toutes les sciences naturelles et tous les arts humains ; et ce qu'il y a d'étonnant, c'est que dans chaque partie, Pline est également grand, l'élévation des idées, la noblesse du style relèvent encore sa profonde érudition ; non seulement il savait tout ce qu'on pouvait savoir de son temps, mais il avait cette facilité de penser en grand qui multiplie la science, il avait cette finesse de réflexion de laquelle dépendent l'élégance et le goût, et il communique à ses lecteurs une certaine liberté d'esprit, une hardiesse de penser qui est le germe de la philosophie. Son ouvrage [...] est si l'on veut une compilation de tout ce qui avait été écrit avant lui, une copie de tout ce qui avait été fait d'excellent et d'utile à savoir ; mais cette copie a de si grands traits, cette compilation contient des choses rassemblées d'une manière si neuve, qu'elle est préférable à la plupart des ouvrages originaux qui traitent des mêmes matières³⁷.

Dans l'*Histoire naturelle*, Buffon distingue histoire et description. Pour ce qui tient à l'histoire, les Anciens l'emportent sur les Modernes ; mais non pas pour la description :

Tout cela venait du peu de goût que les Anciens avaient pour la physique, ou, pour parler plus exactement, comme ils n'avaient aucune idée de ce que nous appelons physique particulière et expérimentale, ils ne pensaient pas que l'on pût tirer aucun avantage de l'examen scrupuleux et de la description exacte de toutes les parties d'une plante ou d'un petit animal, et ils ne voyaient pas les rapports que cela pouvait avoir avec l'explication des phénomènes de la nature³⁸.

Eu égard au contexte précédemment décrit, un tel discours peut surprendre. Dans l'*Encyclopédie*, Diderot, qui se fait l'écho des propos très favorables de Buffon sur l'*Histoire des animaux*, écrit à propos d'Aristote à l'article « Aristotélisme » :

Le mépris qu'on a eu pour lui dans ces derniers siècles, vient de ce qu'au lieu des originaux, que personne ne lisait, parce qu'ils étaient en grec, on consultait les commentateurs arabes et scholastiques, entre les mains desquels on ne peut douter que ce Philosophe n'ait beaucoup perdu de ses traits. En effet, ils lui ont prêté les idées les plus monstrueuses, et lui ont fait parler un langage intelligible [...]. Ceux qui ont lu ses ouvrages dans l'original, lui ont rendu plus de justice. Ils ont admiré en lui un esprit élevé, des connaissances variées, approfondies, et des vues générales. Et si sur la Physique il n'a pas poussé les recherches aussi loin qu'on l'a fait aujourd'hui, c'est que cette science ne peut se perfectionner que par le secours des expériences, ce qui dépend, comme l'on voit, du temps³⁹.

Si l'*Histoire naturelle* de Pline avait fait l'objet de débats philologiques et scientifiques dès les débuts de l'imprimerie⁴⁰, si ce livre fut une source majeure pour les botanistes et les zoologistes, pour un Gessner ou un Aldrovandi notamment, force est de constater que le XVII^e siècle ne lui fut pas favorable et qu'entre 1640 et 1740 il n'y eut, en l'espace d'un siècle que deux éditions complètes et annotées : celle de Gronovius (Leyde, 1668-1669) et celle du père Hardouin, réalisée dans la collection *Ad usum Delphini*, dont la première édition est de 1685, la seconde, enrichie, de 1723 et la troisième de 1741⁴¹. Le père Hardouin, personnage au demeurant controversé, y a réalisé un important travail philologique et érudit mais qui laissa indifférents les hommes de science.

Cette réhabilitation de Pline contraste avec les jugements sévères portés à son encontre aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles. Rappelons pour mémoire qu'à la Renaissance, la

³⁹ *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, t. I, chez Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, Paris 1752 ; « Aristotélisme », pp. 652-673 : 660.

⁴⁰ L'édition princeps est publiée à Venise en 1469 et, en 1499, on compte déjà 14 éditions complètes du texte. On en compte plusieurs dizaines au XVI^e siècle, complètes ou partielles. Sur Pline à la Renaissance, M.-É. Boutroue, *Pline ou le Trésor du monde. Recherches sur quelques aspects de la transmission de l'Histoire naturelle de Pline l'Ancien, Xe-XVI^e siècles*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris Nanterre, 1998 ; C. G. Nauert, *Humanists, Scientists and Pliny: Changing Approaches to a Classical Author*, « American Historical Review », 84, 1, 1979, pp. 72-85 ; A. Labarre, *Diffusion de l'Historia naturalis de Pline au temps de la Renaissance*, dans *Festschrift für Claus Nissen*, Pressler, Wiesbaden 1973, pp. 451-469.

⁴¹ Sur cette édition : G. Demerson, A. Jacquetin, M. Mund-Dopchie, *Pline, dans La collection Ad usum Delphini*, sous la direction de M. Furno, ELLUG, Grenoble 2005, vol. II, p. 323-341.

³⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 20-21

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 22. Voir S. Schmitt, *Pline l'Ancien et la science des Lumières*, « Pour la science », 435, 2013 ; Id., « La présence des savoirs anciens dans l'Histoire naturelle », dans Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, VIII (1758), Champion, Paris 2014, pp. 13-132 ; *La permanence des savoirs antiques dans l'histoire naturelle du second XVIII^e siècle*, dans *Natural History in Early Modern France: The Poetics of an Epistemic Genre*, R. Garrod and P. Smith eds., Brill, Leiden 2018, pp. 241-262.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

confrontation de Pline avec la nature avait suscité des ouvrages très critiques comme ceux d'Ermolao Barbaro (1454-1493), patriarche de Venise⁴² de ou Laurent Joubert (1528-1583), grand médecin de Montpellier, sur les erreurs de Pline. Rien ne laissait donc présager le complet retournement opéré par Buffon qui inscrit son *Histoire naturelle* sous le patronage de Pline qu'il admire tant pour le fond que pour la forme⁴³.

Dans la foulée de la publication de Buffon, Malesherbes formula le vœu que soit réalisée une nouvelle édition savante de Pline :

M. de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, Premier Président de la Cour des Aides, qui joint aux qualités dont s'honore la Magistrature, héréditaires dans sa maison, le goût le plus éclairé, le plus constant, et le zèle le plus actif pour les Sciences et les Lettres, conçut le premier, vers l'année 1750, le projet d'une nouvelle édition et d'une Traduction entière de Pline. Il excita plusieurs Savants à coopérer à cette grande entreprise; et elle fut commencée sous ses auspices⁴⁴.

Guillaume Chrétien de Malesherbes (1721-1794) est le directeur de la Librairie entre 1750 et 1753 et c'est lui qui protégea l'entreprise de l'*Encyclopédie* et en permit la poursuite. Passionné de botanique, il a suivi les cours de Jussieu et expérimenté des plantations dans son château de Malesherbes (Loiret)⁴⁵. Les trois académies l'honorèrent : l'Académie des sciences en 1750, des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres en 1759 et l'Académie française en 1775. Pour cette édition de Pline, avec « toutes les rectifications, toutes les connaissances nouvelles, toutes les additions nécessaires pour fixer avec sûreté l'accroissement de notre savoir depuis Pline, les auteurs de cet accroissement et la limite actuelle de nos connaissances », il organisa chez lui des conférences préparatoires en 1757. La

Bibliothèque nationale de Paris possède un témoignage sur l'élaboration de cet ouvrage⁴⁶ qui fait état des difficultés de l'entreprise et de son importance et mentionne le nom des principaux collaborateurs, tous prestigieux : le géographe Bourguignon d'Anville, Caperonnier, Claude Gros de Boze († 1753) de l'Académie des inscriptions, Mariette, les chimistes Rouelle et Macquer, les physiciens Nollet et de Parcieux, les naturalistes Bernard de Jussieu, Guettard et Daubenton. Fougeroux de Bondaroy a remis des notes sur le livre XVIIIe (l'agriculture) et Malesherbes en personne sur le XIVe (De la vigne) et a laissé des notes autographes « Pour Pline. Questions à faire. Conférences avec M. Duhamel et M. de Fougeroux sur la vigne ». L'académicien Gabriel Brotier s'en est fait l'écho en tête de son édition latine de Pline en 1779⁴⁷.

C'est en définitive Louis Poinsinet de Sivry (1733-1804) qui récupéra le projet et assura l'harmonisation des pièces et des morceaux et l'achèvement de l'ensemble qui parut entre 1771 et 1782⁴⁸. Après la pléiade de savants réunis par Malesherbes, ce choix peut surprendre car si Poinsinet de Sivry passait pour un bon helléniste et latiniste, il avait publié à cette date des recherches sur le rire et sur l'humanité primitive « urienne » vivant dans les forêts⁴⁹ qui ne le prédispo-

⁴⁶ BnF, Ms NAF 23674, « Manuscrits relatifs à un plan de traduction de l'Histoire naturelle de Pline » ; voir Grosclaude, *Malesherbes*, cit., p. 486.

⁴⁷ *Caii Plinii secundi Historiæ naturalis libri XXXVII, quos recensuit et notis illustravit Gabriel Brotier*, typis J. Barbou, Parisiis 1779, 6 tt.

⁴⁸ *L'Histoire naturelle de Pline, traduite en français avec le texte latin rétabli d'après les meilleures leçons manuscrites*, (Paris, chez la Veuve Desaint), parut entre 1771-1782, en 12 vol. in 4°. Il évoque dans la préface la part de Louis Jouard de La Nauze (1696-1773), membre de l'Académie des inscriptions (1754), du médecin Augustin Jault (1700-1757), professeur de syriaque et de grec au Collège royal, et de Anne Gabriel Meunier de Querlon (1702-1780), éditeur des *Voyages en Allemagne et en Italie* de Montaigne (1774) ; les annotations de Jean Étienne Guettard et de Jérôme Lalande. Sur cette édition : J. Loveland et S. Schmitt, *Poinsinet's Edition of the Naturalis Historia and the revival of Pliny in the Sciences of the Enlightenment*, « *Annals of Science* », 72-1, 2015, pp. 2-27.

⁴⁹ Outre quelques traductions (Anacréon, Sapho, Moschos, Tyrthée) et quelques tragédies (*Briseis* ou *la colère d'Achille*, *Ajax*, plus tard *Caton*), on lui doit un *Traité des causes physiques et morales du rire relativement à l'art de l'exciter* (Amsterdam). Dans son *Origine des premières sociétés, des peuples, des sciences, des arts et des idiomes anciens et modernes* (chez Lacombe, à Amsterdam et se trouve à Paris 1769; repr. Jobert, Paris 1977), il établit sur la base d'étymologies et de toponymes que toutes les langues dérivent de l'« urien », l'un des plus anciens dialectes celtiques, jadis universellement parlé, une thèse qui ne l'a pas sorti de l'obscurité, mais qu'il recycla dans les notes au titre des « nouvelles vues et des nouvelles recherches ». « Il fallait apporter dans les discussions, outre la connaissance des langues grecque et latine, les éléments des anciennes langues orientales et ceux des divers idiomes celtiques et scytho-celtiques qui entrent comme partie essentielle dans l'ancienne géographie » (« Préface », p. XXIV). Sa gloire resta provinciale (académies de Nancy et de Dijon). Cet auteur reste aujourd'hui ignoré et la seule notice à son sujet (d'Hervé Guénou, *Dictionnaire des Journalistes, 1600-1789*, n° 647) ignore son œuvre scientifique.

⁴² *Castigationes Plinianæ et in Pomponium Melam*, Eucharius Silber, Rome 1493. Principal ouvrage de l'humaniste vénitien Ermolao Barbaro (1454-1493) et première étude critique rigoureuse de l'œuvre de Pline, ce gros travail de critique textuelle a mis en évidence, par la collation de manuscrits et par la réflexion sur le texte, un grand nombre de lieux à corriger dans le texte de l'encyclopédie plinienne.

⁴³ S. Schmitt est aussi l'éditeur de Pline : Pline l'Ancien, *Histoire naturelle*, traduction, introduction et notes, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris 2013.

⁴⁴ *Histoire naturelle de Pline traduite en français, avec le texte latin [...] accompagnée de Notes critiques [...] et d'Observations sur les connaissances des Anciens comparées avec les découvertes des Modernes*, chez la veuve Desaint, Paris 1771, t. I, pp. XVIII-XIX.

⁴⁵ Sur Malesherbes « le naturaliste », P. Grosclaude, *Malesherbes témoin et interprète de son temps*, Fischbacher, Paris 1961, (pp. 463-497). Les *Observations de Lamoignon-Malesherbes sur l'Histoire naturelle générale et particulière de Buffon et Daubenton, avec une introduction* de Paul Abeille, C. Pougens, Paris an VI (1798), 2 tt., sont très critiques sur le premier volume. Malesherbes n'a pas voulu publier pour ne pas faire de tort à son ami.

saient pas à cette tâche. C'était la première traduction réalisée en français depuis celle d'Antoine du Pinet de Noroy qui parut en 1562. L'ouvrage est présenté dans la Préface comme l'ancêtre de toutes les encyclopédies, « La seule compilation de génie aussi capable d'exciter celui des lecteurs que de les instruire » :

L'Histoire naturelle de Pline est l'Encyclopédie des Anciens. On peut la considérer comme le dépôt de toutes les connaissances physiques, astronomiques, géographiques de l'Antiquité; comme le tableau de toute l'industrie humaine ou des arts, depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'au premier siècle de notre ère. C'est l'ouvrage au moins le plus vaste, le plus intéressant et le plus curieux qu'aient jamais produit les Romains; les Grecs n'ont rien à lui comparer. Aristote même qui, comme dit Montagne, *a tout remué*, ainsi que Pline, est encore fort éloigné de son abondance et de sa richesse⁵⁰. [...]

Combien doit être précieux un ouvrage qui nous met en état de profiter de l'expérience et des découvertes des Anciens dans les connaissances naturelles qui nous sont devenues si chères, de comparer leurs progrès aux nôtres, de calculer en conséquence nos acquisitions et nos pertes, enfin de revenir sur les pas de toute l'Antiquité, soit pour reconnaître ses erreurs, soit pour recueillir les moindres points de lumière que ses monuments peuvent receler⁵¹ !

Aux yeux des éditeurs, l'*Histoire naturelle* de Pline est une véritable source de connaissances dont leurs contemporains ignorent les richesses dont ils pourraient tirer profit :

Quand on a lu les cinq livres de Pline sur les remèdes tirés des plantes, on est tenté de croire que le règne végétal contient seul la Médecine universelle. [...] Parmi beaucoup de remèdes évidemment faux, illusoire, dangereux même, équivoques, peu sûrs, etc. il en est d'innocents, de très simples, qui pouvaient être éprouvés depuis longtemps. Que nous coûterait-il de revenir sur les pas de Pline, et de vérifier ceux de ses remèdes qu'il présente avec quelque assurance? Ce sont des graines, des racines, des feuilles, des baies, des fruits, des écorces, des sucres et des gommes; c'est la pharmacie la moins compliquée et à portée de tout le monde. Que risquerait-on d'essayer des préparations si faciles? [...] La médecine aisée des plantes indigènes, à laquelle Pline nous rappelle sans cesse, paraît avoir été trop négligée pour les compositions des boutiques. Les remèdes de beaucoup de maux sont peut-être bien près de nous.

Une recherche encore à faire dans la lecture de Pline, et qui ne serait pas inutile, ce serait de former un tableau de toutes les maladies dont il parle. Cette Nosologie, conférée avec celle des médecins grecs, pourrait quelquefois éclairer la nôtre⁵².

⁵⁰ *Histoire naturelle de Pline*, cit., « Préface », p. I.

⁵¹ Ivi, pp. IV-V.

⁵² Ivi, pp. VIII-IX. Ce qui a d'ailleurs été fait au IV^e siècle dans la *Medi-*

Et de conclure :

Pline est encore aujourd'hui le livre des Astronomes, des Géographes, des Historiens, des Chronologistes, des Médecins, des Botanistes, des Agricoles, etc. (1) [note (1) : « C'est pour cela qu'on l'a nommé la *Bibliothèque des pauvres* »⁵³].

Le Pline est suivi par une nouvelle édition de l'*Histoire des animaux* d'Aristote par Armand-Gaston Camus⁵⁴. Il y est question de « l'exactitude des observations dont nous sommes en état de juger, parce que nous connaissons les mêmes objets qu'ils ont vus et qu'ils ont décrits »⁵⁵, notamment en ce qui concerne les quadrupèdes et les insectes. Il propose même des recherches qui, si elles nous sont familières aujourd'hui que nous avons constaté la disparition de nombreuses espèces, étaient tout à fait neuves à l'époque :

Et quand même tous les animaux qui ont été observés par les Anciens l'auraient été également par les Modernes; quand ceux-ci auraient étudié avec le même soin, la forme, la nature, le caractère de tous les êtres vivants, serait-il donc sans agrément ou sans utilité, de comparer l'état de ces êtres vivants à deux époques séparées l'une de l'autre par un espace de vingt et un siècles? N'y a-t-il pas eu des espèces de transmutations chez les Animaux comme chez les hommes? Telles espèces ne sont-elles pas devenues communes dans des contrées où jadis elles n'existaient pas; et telles autres n'ont-elles pas déserté les lieux qu'elles fréquentaient? Les effets de la population humaine, de la culture des terres, du dessèchement des marais, en un mot, de cette inquiétude de l'homme qui tourmente sans cesse la surface du globe, n'ont-ils pas influé jusque sur les bêtes? Voilà des objets intéressants à connaître, et l'on ne peut y parvenir que par la comparaison des ouvrages des Anciens et des Modernes⁵⁶.

Le second tome, de notes, comprend un discours préliminaire qui, au paragraphe 8 (pp. XXXII-XXXV), évoque l'avantage que nous pouvons retirer des écrits des Anciens sur l'histoire naturelle; moyens de les rendre utiles ».

Cette invitation à relire les Anciens ne concerne pas seulement l'histoire naturelle. L'astronome Alexandre-Guy Pingré (1711-1791), bibliothécaire de l'abbaye de Sainte-Geneviève où il avait son observatoire, à qui

cina Plinii qui est une compilation des recettes de médecine domestique éparses dans l'*Histoire naturelle*.

⁵³ Ivi, p. XXV.

⁵⁴ A.-G. Camus, *Histoire des animaux d'Aristote*, chez la Veuve Desaint, Paris 1783, 2 tt.

⁵⁵ Ivi, t. II, *Notes sur l'Histoire des animaux d'Aristote*, « Discours préliminaire », p. XXXIII.

⁵⁶ Ivi, pp. XXXIII-IV.

l'on doit le premier *Almanach nautique* (1753) a travaillé avec La Caille à *L'Art de vérifier les dates* (1750, des mauristes dom Clémencet, dom Dantine et dom d'Ursin Durand) en révisant la chronologie de toutes les éclipses des 19 premiers siècles⁵⁷. Il s'est aussi passionné pour les comètes en reprenant toutes les anciennes annales et les observations les plus récentes. Il entreprend sa *Cométographie*, mise en perspective historique des passages des comètes, alors que l'on attendait le retour de la comète de Halley⁵⁸. La *Cométographie ou Traité historique et théorique des comètes* ne souligne pas seulement l'utilité pour les astronomes de reprendre toutes les observations pour calculer les trajectoires des comètes. Elle affirme aussi que les théories des Anciens sur les comètes n'étaient pas toutes à rejeter, comme devaient l'être celles d'Aristote dans les *Météorologiques*. Ainsi Alexandre-Guy Pingré ne fait-il que mettre en œuvre un projet de Sénèque (*Questions naturelles*, VII-1) :

Les Comètes, dis-je, sont enfin généralement reconnues pour être des Astres aussi anciens que le monde: ce sont autant d'anneaux de la chaîne qui unit toutes les parties de ce vaste univers: c'est une nouvelle branche de l'Astronomie, dont presque tous les rameaux échappent encore à nos regards. Peut-il être un objet plus digne de notre curiosité? "Non, en vérité, disait autrefois Sénèque, je ne connais pas de recherche plus noble, de science plus utile que celle qui se propose la connaissance des Astres pour objet. Mais, ajoutait-il, pour perfectionner cette science, n'est-il pas à propos d'examiner si la nature des Comètes diffère de celle des autres corps célestes? Si nous réfléchissons sur leurs mouvements, sur les vicissitudes de leur lever et de leur coucher, sur leur lumière et leur éclat, nous serons frappés de l'analogie que nous apercevons entre elles et ces autres corps. Il est au reste nécessaire d'avoir une histoire exacte des comètes qui ont paru autrefois; car enfin (c'est toujours Sénèque qui parle) la rareté de leurs apparitions ne nous permet pas de décider si leurs mouvements sont réglés; nous ignorons si, décrivant des orbites constantes, elles doivent reparoître dans des

temps périodiques et déterminés". Nous ne doutons plus maintenant de cette vérité. Une Comète a reparu au temps précis que l'Astronomie et la Géométrie avaient déterminé pour son retour. [...] Nous n'en connaissons encore qu'une seule, deux tout au plus: nous entrevoyons seulement l'orbite de quelques autres: le temps, les observations, l'application, le calcul mettront nos successeurs en état de faire de plus grands progrès dans cette carrière⁵⁹.

4. « LA GRANDEUR DE NOTRE PERTE »

En 1766, Louis Dutens (1730-1812), philologue, numismate, éditeur de Leibniz (1768), historiographe du roi de Grande-Bretagne et grand voyageur⁶⁰, publie son premier ouvrage en 1766: *Recherches sur l'Origine des découvertes attribuées aux Modernes*, réédité en 1776⁶¹ et encore en 1812, signe de son succès, comme son élection à la Royal Society et comme associé à l'Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres. L'objet du livre est de démontrer « qu'il n'est presque pas une des découvertes attribuées aux modernes qui n'ait été non seulement connue des Anciens, mais même appuyée par de solides raisonnements des Anciens »⁶².

Dutens a recours à trois types d'arguments: le premier, c'est que les innovations des Modernes sont indéniables, mais qu'elles ne sont que le prolongement ou la conséquence de découvertes remontant à l'Antiquité:

Les Modernes ont certainement mérité beaucoup, et n'ont pas peu travaillé à l'avancement des sciences par un grand nombre de découvertes ingénieuses; mais on ne peut nier aussi que les Anciens leur avaient frayé le chemin dans lequel ils avancent à présent plus facilement à grands pas⁶³.

Deuxième cas de figure: les prétendues découvertes des Modernes ont toutes leur origine dans l'Antiquité. Il en prend, pour exemple, les reliefs lunaires, observés par Galilée dans le *Sidereus Nuncius* et la voie lactée (que le même a observée en 1610 comme un amas de petites étoiles):

⁵⁷ Pingré est un savant reconnu, associé libre de l'Académie des sciences (comme religieux genovéfain) et membre de l'Académie royale de Marine (1769) à qui l'on doit des publications importantes comme la *Cométographie ou traité historique et théorique des comètes* (Imprimerie royale, Paris 1783) et une traduction de l'*Astronomicon* de Marcus Manilius (*Marcii Manilii Astronomicon libri quinque* [...] *Cum interpretatione Gallica et notis*, Via et Aedibus Serpentinis, Parisii 1786, 2 tt.). Son *Projet d'une histoire d'astronomie du dix-septième siècle* (1756), achevé en 1786, ne fut publié sous le titre d'*Annales célestes du dix-septième siècle* qu'en 1901. Vénérable de la loge « les cœurs simples de l'Étoile polaire » et grand orateur au Grand Orient de France, comme prêtre constitutionnel, il sauva les collections de la bibliothèque de l'abbaye Sainte-Geneviève et contribua à l'élaboration du calendrier révolutionnaire.

⁵⁸ La comète de 1682 dont Halley avait annoncé en 1705 le retour en 1757 et qui parut en mars 1759. Halley avait calculé un intervalle entre deux passages de 75-76 ans: soit 1531, 1607, 1682, 1757.

⁵⁹ Pingré, *Cométographie*, cit., t. I, pp. IV-V.

⁶⁰ On lui doit un *Itinéraire des routes les plus fréquentées, ou Journal d'un voyage aux villes principales de l'Europe* (chez Pissot, Paris 1777), où figurent les distances en milles anglaises mesurées par un odomètre appliqué à sa voiture. Cet auteur assez généralement ignoré, est mentionné par S. Mazauric, *Fontenelle*, cit., pp. 196-199.

⁶¹ Le titre complet est: *Origine des découvertes attribuées aux Modernes, où l'on démontre que nos plus célèbres Philosophes ont puisé la plupart de leurs connaissances dans les Ouvrages des Anciens: et que plusieurs vérités importantes sur la Religion ont été connues des Sages du Paganisme*, chez la Veuve Duchesne, Paris 1776, 2 tt.

⁶² L. Dutens, *Recherches sur l'Origine des découvertes attribuées aux Modernes*, chez la Veuve Duchesne, Paris 1766, t. I, « Introduction », p. 9.

⁶³ Ivi, « Préface », t. I. p. XIV.

Il est à remarquer aussi que ces grands hommes [les Anciens], par l'effort seul de leur raison, avoient acquis des connaissances que toutes nos expériences, faites avec le secours des instruments que le hasard nous a procurés, n'ont servi qu'à confirmer. Sans l'aide du télescope, Démocrite avait connu et enseigné que la voie lactée était un assemblage d'étoiles innombrables qui échappaient à notre vue, et dont la clarté réunie produisait dans le ciel cette blancheur que nous désignons par ce nom ; et il attribuait la cause des taches observées dans la Lune à la hauteur excessive de ses montagnes, et à la profondeur de ses vallées : il est vrai que les modernes ont été plus loin et qu'ils ont trouvé les moyens de mesurer la hauteur de ces mêmes montagnes ; mais encore une fois, il semble que le raisonnement de Démocrite à ces égards était celui d'un grand génie, au lieu que les opérations des modernes ne sont que laborieuses et mécaniques. Outre que, comme dit Sénèque, *ad inquisitionem tantorum, ætas una non sufficit*, et que nous avons de plus sur les Anciens l'avantage d'avoir pu travailler sur le canevas qu'ils nous ont fourni⁶⁴.

Il rapporte ainsi l'héliocentrisme à Aristarque de Samos, la circulation du sang à Hippocrate. Quand il ne peut trouver de précédents aux découvertes des Modernes (l'imprimerie, la poudre à canon, la boussole, le télescope), il en attribue enfin la découverte au hasard (la lunette) quand il n'en dénonce pas les effets nocifs : le massacre des Indiens qui suit la découverte du Nouveau Monde ou la poudre à canon qui rend la guerre plus meurtrière. Après avoir fait le tour de l'ensemble des sciences, Dutens engage les savants à remonter à la « source de la vérité », une conclusion qui va à l'encontre de tout triomphalisme :

Dans presque toutes les vérités importantes, les Anciens ont précédé les Modernes, ou du moins ils ont indiqué ou frayé le chemin à leurs découvertes ; il paraît même que ceux-ci n'ont pas toujours eu le désintéressement de déclarer quels étaient les guides qu'ils avoient suivis pour arriver à leur but [...]

Or il est démontré que si les écrits de ces grands maîtres contiennent la plus grande partie de nos connaissances et que les découvertes des plus célèbres des Modernes y aient pris leur origine, n'est-il pas plus raisonnable que nous allions puiser directement à la source, sans nous en tenir entièrement aux ruisseaux qui en découlent⁶⁵ ?

Jean Sylvain Bailly a la réputation d'être un astronome sérieux (on lui doit un *Essai sur la théorie des satellites de Jupiter* en 1766 et sur les inégalités de la lumière des satellites de Jupiter en 1771) quand il est élu en 1763 à l'Académie des sciences comme physicien, puis comme astronome en 1770. Toutefois, il s'intéresse

moins à l'astronomie pour elle-même qu'à son histoire qu'il conçoit comme une « noble construction », parallèle à l'*Histoire naturelle*. Pour ce carriériste qui sait flatter ses protecteurs, les ouvrages historico-scientifiques sont source d'un succès facile. Il s'en fait une spécialité. Il publie en 1775 son *Histoire de l'astronomie ancienne depuis son origine jusqu'à l'établissement de l'École d'Alexandrie* où établit que la science astronomique antique ne vient pas des Grecs, mais que les Grecs eux-mêmes en ont hérité :

Tout ce qui est vraiment astronomique fut étranger à la Grèce. L'ordre et l'arrangement des planètes, les causes des éclipses, la méthode pour les prédire, les deux étoiles du matin et du soir, réunies dans une seule planète, la durée des révolutions du soleil et de la lune, la période fameuse de Méton, l'obliquité de l'écliptique, la sphère tout leur vient de l'Égypte ou de l'Asie⁶⁶.

L'*Histoire de l'astronomie moderne* qui prend la suite (1779) court de la fondation de l'École d'Alexandrie jusqu'aux années 1730. Un tel découpage paraît de prime abord surprenant. Bailly s'en explique :

En cherchant les premiers pas de l'esprit humain, en parcourant l'histoire de l'Astronomie ancienne, nous n'avons aperçu que des débris ; nous n'avons rencontré que des vestiges d'une science détruite, d'une institution primitive, dont les restes attestent l'éclat et la splendeur. Sans doute ces débris se tenaient par une chaîne, aujourd'hui brisée et perdue, ou du moins cachée dans l'obscurité des temps [...]

Une preuve que les sciences orientales n'étaient composées que des débris de connaissances plus anciennes, conservées mais non augmentées par leurs possesseurs, c'est que les Grecs établis à Alexandrie ont tout recommencé. Ils avaient renversé l'empire de Babylone, ils s'étaient emparés du trésor de ses sciences. En succédant aux Chaldéens, ils ont fait usage de leurs longues observations [...]

Les temps du règne des Chaldéens, des Indiens et des anciennes nations connues dans l'Asie, sont donc des temps d'oubli ; c'est une lacune dans l'histoire des sciences. Si l'on a pu être surpris que nous ayons fait remonter aux derniers siècles avant notre ère, à la naissance de l'école d'Alexandrie, l'origine de l'astronomie moderne qui fleurit aujourd'hui en Europe, ce n'est pas sans raison que nous avons choisi cette époque. Les tems d'ignorance ont mis une séparation absolue, une véritable barrière entre la première astronomie détruite dans des siècles très-reculés et l'astronomie renouvelée dans Alexandrie. Là tout a été recommencé : l'édifice a été

⁶⁴ Ivi, « Introduction », pp. 8-9.

⁶⁵ Dutens, *Origine des découvertes*, cit., II, pp. 339, 352-353.

⁶⁶ J.S. Bailly, *Histoire de l'astronomie ancienne, depuis son origine jusqu'à l'établissement de l'École d'Alexandrie*, chez les frères Debure, Paris 1775, p. 258.

reconstruit par ses fondements ; et ces fondements sont encore aujourd'hui ceux de l'astronomie que nous avons perfectionnée⁶⁷.

Entre la parution de ces volumes, entre 1775 et 1778-83, Bailly a découvert l'Atlantide, civilisation qui avait porté au plus haut degré toutes les sciences avant d'être détruite⁶⁸. Cette découverte est l'objet de ses *Lettres sur l'origine des sciences et sur celle des peuples de l'Asie* (1777) adressées à Voltaire (qui les reçut avec ironie) et des *Lettres sur l'Atlantide de Platon et sur l'ancienne histoire de l'Asie* (1779) où il traque les débris de cette science originelle⁶⁹, comme il s'y attache encore, en 1787, dans son *Histoire de l'astronomie indienne et orientale*, qui fait suite à l'astronomie ancienne. L'histoire de la science, selon Bailly, suit un double chemin – d'Orient en Occident, suivant le cours apparent du Soleil ; et du Nord vers le Sud – et il se livre à un examen comparatif des traditions mythiques et des plus récentes hypothèses sur la structure de la Terre et son refroidissement (selon Buffon). « Fare storia dell'astronomia delle antiche nazioni significa per Bailly sapersi districare tra miti e credenze astrologiche, tra convinzioni teologiche e pratiche divinatorie che convivevano con le conoscenze scientifiche » écrit Mirella Pasini⁷⁰.

Ces vues n'ont pas été jugées loufoques par ses contemporains. Voltaire qui attribue volontiers les origines aux Indiens se dit « fort ébranlé et presque converti », non sans une pointe d'ironie : « Le phénix ne me paraissait pas inventé par les habitants du Caucase : mais enfin, Monsieur, tout ce que vous avancez me paraît d'une si vaste érudition et appuyé de si grandes probabilités, que je sacrifie sans peine tous mes doutes à votre torrent de lumières »⁷¹. Edwin B. Smith et Mirella Pasini ont rapproché les élucubrations de Bailly sur l'origine des sciences et de l'astronomie avec la tradition maçonnique, notamment en ce qui concerne l'unité du monde et le néo-pythagorisme. Les élections de Bailly à l'Académie française en 1783 avec l'appui de Buffon, et encore

de l'Académie des inscriptions, en 1785 sont la preuve du succès de ce « parfait courtisan ».

Bailly n'accorde à Hipparque et à Ptolémée que le statut de refondateurs de l'astronomie en ce qu'ils ont reconstruit une science perdue et oubliée. Dutens, lui, avait prêté aux Anciens, et aux Grecs notamment, un génie d'inventeurs et préconisait de relire attentivement leurs écrits pour y rechercher des intuitions et des idées et non seulement des faits, des observations ou des erreurs.

L'idée de hautes connaissances détenues par des civilisations disparues et quelquefois transmises secrètement par une chaîne d'initiés imprègne l'ésotérisme français du XIXe et du XXe siècles, avec René Guénon jusqu'au sulfureux bestseller de Louis Pauwels et Jacques Bergier, *Le matin des magiciens* (1960). Si le *revival* des Anciens, initié par Buffon, a connu sous le règne de Louis XVI un succès sans précédent, contemporain d'une Franc-Maçonnerie initiatique qui fait la part belle aux mystères égyptiens et orientaux⁷² et qui a assuré le succès et la diffusion des thèses de Bailly, lui-même membre de la fameuse loge des Neuf Sœurs⁷³, il est rapidement retombé dans les milieux rationalistes. Dès le début du XIXe siècle, avec la professionnalisation des savants, l'encyclopédisme et les compilations sont abandonnés aux vulgarisateurs. Après 1830, Plin est définitivement abandonné aux historiens : on lui reproche sa crédulité, son manque d'esprit critique, ses erreurs, ses digressions et il devient, en quelque sorte, le symbole du naufrage de la science antique⁷⁴. Il reste que la dette à l'égard de la science antique, de nos jours souvent ignorée, est importante comme l'a récemment rappelé Lucio Rosso⁷⁵.

⁶⁷ Bailly, *Histoire de l'astronomie moderne depuis la fondation de l'École d'Alexandrie*, Paris, Debure, 1779, 2 tt. ; t. I, pp. 1-3.

⁶⁸ Sur Bailly et l'astronomie antédiluvienne, E. Burrows Smith, *Jean Sylvain Bailly : Astronomer, Mystic and Revolutionary (1736-1793)*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia 1954 ; M. Pasini, *L'astronomie antédiluvienne : storia della scienza e origini della civiltà in J. S. Bailly*, « Studi Settecenteschi », 11-12, 1988-1989, pp. 197-235 ; Dagen, *L'histoire de l'esprit humain*, cit., p. 522-540 ; Ch. Grell, *Le XVIIIe siècle et l'Antiquité en France, 1680-1789*, Voltaire Foundation (Studies on Voltaire, 330-331), Oxford 1995 ; vol. II, pp. 963-973.

⁶⁹ P. Vidal-Naquet, *L'Atlantide, petite histoire d'un mythe platonicien*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2005.

⁷⁰ Pasini, *L'astronomie antédiluvienne*, cit., p. 222.

⁷¹ J.S. Bailly, *Lettres sur l'origine des sciences, et sur celle des peuples de l'Asie*, chez M. Elmesly, à Londres, et à Paris 1777, pp. 9, 14.

⁷² Voir à ce sujet le 'classique' J. Baltrusaitis, *La quête d'Isis, essai sur la légende d'un mythe*, Flammarion, Paris 1997.

⁷³ Bailly, selon Louis Amiable, appartenait à la loge des Neuf Sœurs en 1784 où il put côtoyer Court de Gébelin, Franklin et Condorcet entre autres. Dans les controverses que souleva son hypothèse du peuple primitif disparu instituteur du genre humain, il reçut le soutien du frère Lalande, fondateur de cette loge en 1776, qui fera son éloge en 1795. Lalande joua aussi un rôle important au Grand Orient de France. On pourrait citer également le deuxième entretien des *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* de Joseph de Maistre, maçon lui aussi (*Œuvres*, éd. Pierre Glaudes, Bouquins Lafont, Paris 2021, pp. 490-493).

⁷⁴ Selon Jeff Loveland et Stéphane Schmitt, *Poinsinet's Edition of the Naturalis Historia*, cit., pp. 2-27.

⁷⁵ L. Russo, *Notre culture scientifique. Le monde antique en héritage*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2020 (Mondadori, Milan 2018).



Citation: Jin, W. (2025). Revisiting Enlightenment Universalism: 18th-Century Lessons on Nonliteral Translations and Transcultural Storytelling. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 71-78. doi: 10.36253/ds-15453

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Revisiting Enlightenment Universalism: 18th-Century Lessons on Nonliteral Translations and Transcultural Storytelling

WEN JIN

East China Normal University, China

Abstract. A large number of transcultural fictions appeared in the 18th century, providing us with an important entry into discussing the task of comparative literature today. The 18th-century Oriental tales, stories authored by European writers that adapted from or modeled themselves after loose translations of folk tales from the East, practiced a kind of mental shapeshifting, blurring the boundaries between East and West. The same kind of cross-cultural identification is visible in many other literary narratives from the same period, indicative of a fluid, universalist politics regarding Europe's relations with the Orient that requires reevaluation. 18th-century transcultural fictions suggest a few tactics for mediating between the necessity of establishing grounds of comparison and the need to draw distinctions. In its search for ways of breaking through the stronghold of cultural nationalism, comparative literature in its contemporary incarnation does well to rethink Enlightenment universalism as encoded in the literary landscape of 18th century Europe.

Keywords: 18th century, Enlightenment, Universalism, Translation.

Eighteenth-century European literature features a strange genre, the Oriental tale, which includes stories or episodic novels written by European authors, modeled upon *One Thousand and One Nights* and similar collections of tales translated into European languages at the turn of the 18th century. For example, in *Zadig* (1747), Voltaire writes of a Babylonian philosopher driven into exile by misfortunes and eventually learns the un-Christian lesson of submitting to the blind fate; in *The History of Rasselas* (1759), Doctor Johnson writes about an Ethiopian prince who wanders across Egypt in search of elusive happiness. The 18th-century Oriental tale often stages a miraculous kind of shapeshifting: European authors try to depict non-European characters in part by projecting their own experiences and in part through informed speculation about people in the Orient. Thus, they produce fictional beings with a mixed genesis; cross-breeds, so to speak, between European and non-European minds. These fictional Oriental characters often figure as perpetual wanderers, crossing geographical borders and commenting on social experiences that refract the historical realities of both East and West. To be sure, Oriental tales catered to the 18th-century

book market's hunger for fanciful stories set in exotic places. Thoroughly commercialized as they were, they performed an important intellectual and cultural function. They stage a playful mental exercise, that of seeking to inhabit culturally different minds while acknowledging their distinct reality, generating fictional minds with inherently doubled and multiplied perspectives. We can use the term "intellectual shapeshifting" to highlight the authorial performance entailed in this literary genre, which quickly dissipated after the 18th century. Orientalism from the 19th century onward treats the East as transparent, separate, and static, but the shapeshifting exercises from the 18th century understood the Oriental as an image arising from cultural mixing, entwined with Europe's project of understanding and reforming itself.

The 18th-century Oriental tale is emblematic of the playfulness and openness that marked Western culture on the cusp of the modern era, when rigid separations (between mind and matter, between Christian and pagan) started breaking down and new, equally rigid social structures based on class, race, and gender were not yet firmly in place. What I referred to as Enlightenment universalism in the title describes exactly this type of self-enrichment through hypothetical fusion with others. This is perhaps the most important legacy that 18th century fiction offers us.

The shapeshifting that we see in 18th-century fiction (not just in oriental tales, but in sentimental novels and utopian novels too) cannot be equated with the ventriloquy seen in minstrel shows. It requires intelligent and informed guesses and so it is "speculative." Experience alone does not allow us to step into other minds, especially when there is not much experience yet available (as was the case with 18th-century European relations with the East). So what the European writers did in their fiction a few hundred years ago is not unlike what science fiction writers do today, when they write from the perspectives of things (as in Gwyneth Jones's *The Universe of Things*) and AI (as in Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*). We may do well to describe 18th-century Oriental fiction as embodying a special kind of speculative realism, by which I mean two almost contradictory things: 1) writing about the distant and unknown other as vibrant beings who constantly unsettle European frameworks of reference; and 2) conversely, assuming that the Eastern cultures have significant structural parallels with one's own culture and are thus legible through a mixture of empirical learning and imaginative speculation. In other words, the East figures as both different and accessible.

ADVENTURES OF THE SOUL

Let me cite an emblematic scene from an exemplary piece of Oriental fiction, namely French writer Thomas-Simon Gueullette's *Les aventures merveilleuses du mandarin Fum-Hoam: contes chinois* (1723), translated into English as *Chinese Tales: Or the Wonderful Adventures of the Mandarin Fum Hoam*. Gueullette (1683-1766) was born under the reign of Louis XIV, to a magistrate at the Châtelet de Paris. He himself became a magistrate at the age of 26. As he cultivated a habit in collecting legal cases, he kept a career in writing fantastic stories (*fées*) that drew heavily from loose translations of Eastern tales (Jean-Emile Gueullette 21). In *Contes chinois*, a Chinese mandarin Fum Hoam is entrusted by Prince Tongluck to convert a Muslim princess to the Buddhist faith, which includes the belief in transmigration, the notion that a soul passes into another body upon the death of the current host. (This doctrine is seen in Mahayana Buddhism more than Chinese Buddhism, but Gueullette would not have known the difference.) Fum Hoam proceeds to tell the princess about what he experienced and witnessed through his previous lives.

This novel would not have been possible without the spread of *One Thousand and One Nights* in Europe starting from the beginning of the 18th century, which it resembles in structural and thematic ways. *Contes chinois* has a frame story that occasions a panoply of embedded stories, recalling the overall structure of the Arabic tales. The embedded stories unfold across a similar geographical canvas as that seen in *One Thousand and One Nights*, ranging from Damascus, Isfahan, and Agra, to as far as Greece and the Islamic Georgia. The frame story of *Contes chinois* is set in China, evoking the Hunchback story included in the Syrian manuscript of *One Thousand and One Nights* circulating from the 14th century onward and which made its way into volume 4 of Antoine Galland's rendition in the early 18th century.

One Thousand and One Nights is a collection of tales of Indian, Persian, and Arabic origins, circulated orally for centuries before being written down. The first definitive version of the stories, or the original version of the collection, took shape in the second half of the 13th century. This version, now lost, gave rise to competing early copies remarkably similar in style and substance. These copies in turn generated more manuscripts in Syrian and Egyptian. The Egyptian manuscripts incorporated new tales from various eastern languages and sources, giving rise to an unruly, hybridized set of stories. Interestingly the hybridization process foreshadowed the fate of the stories in European languages. Antoine Galland, who first translated the tales into French, used the Syr-

ian manuscript, not only altered the presentation of the stories he translated but also went on to add more stories from other Eastern sources, including ones that he heard from Hannah Diab, a Syrian Maronite from Aleppo (Makdisi and Nussbaum 35). Galland's volumes became so widely popular that they not only marked the beginning of a craze for Oriental stories, but also spurred authors like Gueullette to generate their own stories set in the Orient. These mimic stories have been referred to in recent literary criticism as the "Oriental Tale". This genre greatly supplemented the novels of domestic realism, which also originated in the 18th century, showing that an increasing interest in presenting the private, emotional lives of middle-stationed individuals was coupled with a desire to depict unknown parts of the world in ways that resonate with European minds. Gueullette's *Contes chinois*, as a key practitioner of this genre, embodies the exuberance of the cross-cultural imagination, inspired by the early anthropological knowledge of the Orient. Like the other specimens of this genre, the novel entertains readers with exotic tales while investigating "universal" questions, i.e. questions believed to be relevant to both European and Asian experiences.

This literary phenomenon of the "Oriental tale" was representative of a larger cultural trend. Informed by Galland's mix of nonliteral translations and new writings, the Oriental tale is a kindred genre, mixing imitations and creative rewritings. It was thus intimately connected to the proliferation of pseudo-translations during this period, translations claiming to be based on an original that does not actually exist (Tourney 40). Just like pseudo-translations that blur the boundary between the source language and the target language, the Oriental tale suggests a general belief in the porous divide between Eastern and Western writings in the 18th century¹. Oriental tales were often published as bogus translations or anonymously, inviting the assumption of their being translations of certain Oriental originals. Publishers and readers alike did not concern themselves with where exactly these stories came from. "Shapeshifting" became a central trope of cross-cultural genres of narratives as Oriental tales and pseudo-translations.

The absence of the protocols and norms of "correct" translation, in other words, was culturally productive in a peculiar manner. The turn of the 18th century is an era in which translations among various vernacular languages, European or not, were common, mostly conducted in an anti-literalist style susceptible to alterations

(largely in the categories of "amplification and omission") at the discretion of particular translations (McMurran 74). The latitude taken with translations had much to do with insufficient concern for copyrights and originality, for sure, but more importantly, it shows that translators felt that they could take personal preferences toward how best to use foreign materials, whether to enrich their own writings or to create a more transcultural type of narrative. The modern "national-cultural differentiation", which assumes culture is isomorphic with national identity and both are delimited, was not yet fully present (6). 18th-century European writers did not have to acknowledge or tackle established norms of translation and the underlying ideology of cultural differences. They felt at liberty to experiment with multiple ways of dialoging with the East, be it through translations, rewritings, or a mix of both. For this very reason, the Enlightenment was an age of potentiality, before a binary order between East and West was secured. In fact, Gueullette's first collection of fantastic tales, *Soirées Bretonnes: Nouveaux contes de fées* (Breton Evenings: New Fairy Tales, 1712), begins with a preface that presents the stories as being derived from a Breton manuscript, but we now know that there was never an original (Raleigh 702). *Contes chinois* and the collections that followed were not introduced as translations, but were constructed with the same principles as *Soirées*, all pastiches featuring materials adapted from or created in the vein of previous Orientalists and freewheeling translators of Oriental tales such as Antoine Galland and François Pétis de la Croix².

The politics implicit in the Oriental tales created by Gueullette is captured in the final reversal of *Contes chinois*. At the very end of the novel, we see a strange scene in which the Alroamat, brother of the Islamic princess, reveals that he assumed Fum Hoam's shape and told the stories of transmigration on his behalf. He told the stories to underscore their ridiculousness. He then castigates the Chinese prince for believing in transmigration and committing idolatry. The brother explains his own faith as follows:

We adore but one God, whose Power knows no bounds, and who according to the instructions of our Prophet, has occasions of no more than a little Dust to destroy his Enemies (260).

What is happening in this specific scene? First of all, there is a clear attempt to dismiss the idea of reincarna-

¹ So far, there has been little discussion of how pseudo-translations performed cultural functions. In making the following remarks on what bogus translations might have done culturally, I am indebted to the research of my doctoral student Zhang Zhiyao in his dissertation.

² Raleigh lists other sources, including "Christian lore, fables, the *Gesta romanorum*, the *Cent nouvelles* and related Italian works, tales of chivalry, the *Pantchatantra*, the Talmud, the Qur'an, travel narratives, Barthélemy Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*, Herodotus, Ovid, and fairy tales" (701).

tion associated with Buddhism, contrasting it with the monotheistic notion of the insoluble bond between each body and its soul, which bears out God's supreme power and rationality. Second, it is also implied that the one true God worshipped by Alroamat, who performs terrifying miracles, is not substantially different from the deities in Buddhism. This God also resorts to miracles that do not seem fully rational. He not only changes dust into weapons, but also allows Alroamat to shapeshift into Fum Hoam. The leveling of the one true God and other false deities becomes more explicit when Alroamat admits to have assumed Fum Hoam's appearances «by some cabalistical Words» that he knew (255). This scene, thus, implicitly places both Judaism and Islam, the other two Abrahamic religions aside from Christianity, on the same level as Buddhism.

Is there a third layer to this passage? Does this ending also contain an invisible reference to Christianity itself, especially Catholicism? This is also a plausible reading. We can recall that the trope of shapeshifting is not absent from the Christian Bible. Christ himself is famously a shapeshifter. In Mark 9:2-3, we see that «[Jesus] metamorphosed before [Peter and others], and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them». The most explicit references to shapeshifting appeared in an apocryphal scripture in Coptic Egyptian, Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem's "On the Life and the Passion of Christ", but the New Testament contains traces of that ability too. Also in the Bible, the angels (including Satan) all assume human shapes. Indeed, French author Montesquieu creates a fusion tale in his own oriental fiction *Persian Letters* (1717) that refers to shapeshifting conventions in both Christianity and Arabic cultures. In that tale, a rich man named Ibrahim habitually dominates over his wives, one of whom dies and ascends to heaven. She then asks a young man in heaven to assume Ibrahim's shape to set free the women in the harem. Montesquieu's story is clearly a fusion story, referring to both shapeshifting conventions in Eastern stories like those in *One Thousand and One Nights* and to Biblical stories of angels assuming human shapes. This story in *Persian Letters*, the first one about shapeshifting written in a European language, is very likely the immediate precursor to the shapeshifting story in *Contes chinois*. Gueullette was probably aware of Montesquieu's famous novel and attempted a similar kind of cultural fusion centering on the trope of shapeshifting. As scholars have pointed out, many European Christians in the 18th century discussed Islam as a way of reflecting critically upon monotheistic religions in general, turning Islam into a "religious touchstone" (Hunt *et al.* 252). Gueullette was performing the same

kind of mediation, complicating the picture by drawing Buddhism into the already triangulated relations among the monotheistic religions.

So Gueullette's *Contes chinois* both thematizes shapeshifting, which implies an analogy between transmigration and metamorphosis, and performs shapeshifting in creating Eastern figures. It is of course not an exception in its day. In one of Voltaire's philosophical dialogues, he constructs the personas of Chinese philosophers Kou and Cu-su to debate the meanings of "heaven" and "soul", questions relevant to both European and Chinese cultures (74, 77).

TALES OF EMPATHY WITH THE CULTURAL OTHER

The shapeshifting in *Contes chinois* is symptomatic of larger intellectual and literary trends in the 18th century that exceed the boundaries of Oriental tales. A strong curiosity about what foreign lands and people represent and what they can bring to the West is not compartmentalized in isolated genres. Key Enlightenment writers such as Samuel Johnson and Laurence Sterne, who are not often associated with the Orient, were invariably involved in the patterns of cross-cultural identifications particular to their age.

Johnson was deeply drawn to Asian cultures, hungry for knowledge of languages and cultures. In 1775, he conveyed to James Boswell that he endorsed the decision of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to put out verses in ancient languages, including not only Greek and Latin, but also «Syriack, Arabick, and other more unknown tongues» (Boswell 1: 562). Johnson was also a diligent, well-informed practitioner in the Oriental tale. He published five oriental tales in the *Rambler* and three in the *Idler*, in addition to the better known *Rasselas, the Prince of Abyssinia* (1759). Johnson's literary career has many linkages to early modern English Orientalism, including quite a number of original accounts of Arabic and Turkish lands, including Richard Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603) and Simon Ockley's *The History of the Saracens* (1708).

Johnson's first engagement with Eastern themes took the form of a historical play. *Irene* (1736) draws its plot from Knolles' *Generall Historie*, among other works of early Oriental learning, depicting the fortunes of a Greek Christian, named Irene, captured by Sultan Mahomet during the 1453 conquest of Constantinople. Johnson departs from his source by pitting Irene, who succumbs to the temptation of converting to Islam in exchange for security, against her more virtuous friend Aspasia. Written in sententious blank verse, the play is deeply

mired in the binary imaginary that excludes the Turks from profound humanity. It plugs into the stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims going back to the stigmatization of both the dark-skinned Moor and Turkish troops shown in *Othello*. As he was writing *Irene*, however, Johnson was also translating Father Lobo's *Voyage historique d'Abyssinie* (1728), the French rendition of a manuscript by Portuguese missionary Father Jerónimo Lobo, into English and published the translation (non-literal as most translations are during this period) *A Voyage to Abyssinia* in 1735. In the preface prepared for the translation, Johnson praises Father Lobo for suggesting that «the Creator doth not appear partial in his distributions, but has balanced in most countries their particular inconveniences by particular favours», expressing an inclination to approach the Orient as a site of particularized presentations of universal human experiences (Lobo 12). It is not coincidental that Johnson went on to create moral fables in the *Rambler* and the *Tatler* modeled on Oriental tales.

The acknowledgement of the universality of human nature is shown clearly in *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1733), a moral fable in the guise of an Oriental tale. As Boswell points out in his account of Johnson's life, none of Johnson's other works is more «extensively diffused over Europe» than the tale rich in both Oriental imagery and important scenes of human life (1: 210). In the beginning of the story, Prince Rasselas feels inexplicable discontent about life in the Happy Valley, a royal retreat secluded from all worldly cares, and discusses this strange malaise with the poet Imlac. The two of them refer especially to the perceived happiness of Europeans, with mechanized comforts of life and infrastructure of communication that facilitates interchange of ideas among friends (Johnson 34). This topic shows clearly that Johnson, like many of his contemporaries, is concerned with comparative advantages of European culture in the throes of modernization and Asian cultural traditions. Unlike those invested in comparing institutions, religions, and customs, Johnson initiated a discussion of relative degrees of "happiness", a topic that did not become prominent until early 19th-century utilitarianism. His conclusion, that «Europeans are less unhappy» than Abyssinians but are not sufficiently happy, is a clear departure from the biased views toward the Orient that many Enlightenment elites, including Johnson himself, sometimes held (34). In Imlac's solo journey and in the journey that the poet undertook along with Rasselas, both of which pass through Egypt, Cairo is presented as a prosperous hub of regional commerce, with a congregation of travelers and merchants who sprinkled the city with mirth. Cairo is depicted as a precursor to the Euro-

pean cities undergoing commercialized transformations, not yet the colonized city that fell under Napoleon.

Johnson's divided views of the Orient capture the central paradox of the ways in which the Orient figured in 18th-century Europe. Eastern customs and knowledge generated both sympathetic admiration and defensive disdain in Enlightenment thinkers, hovering around their writings like shadows that never settled into fixed patterns. Indeed, before his death, Johnson recalls that he used, when sleepless in bed, to «read like a Turk» (Boswell 2: 604). The "Turk" in this claim, associated with Johnson's voracious appetite for books, carries ambiguous connotations, implying both vibrancy and excess.

Laurence Sterne, who advocates gentle sentiments in his works, is also a curious example of cross-cultural empathy. He not only identifies with the Indian Brahmin in his letters, but also alludes to Confucius in his most important work *Tristram Shandy*. If Johnson was invested in universal human inclinations, Sterne was intimately concerned with how modernity felt. Sterne's sentimentalism points to a different kind of universalism. He turns to the East for alternatives to the West, presenting Indian and Chinese cultures as remote parallels to his own critical reflections on incipient modern conditions.

Sterne's most direct engagement with the East came from his relationship with Eliza Draper. Eliza was born Elizabeth Sclater at Anjengo, India in 1744. Educated at a boarding school in England, she returned to her grandfather in Bombay in 1757 and was married at 14 to Daniel Draper, Accountant General in Bombay. She returned to England in 1765 to take her children home for education and met Sterne in early 1767. They were in London together for three months, after which Eliza returned to Bombay. They kept up correspondence for a year afterwards, until Sterne died of consumption, and the letters from Sterne were published first in 1773 as *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* and retitled in 1904 as *Journal to Eliza*.

Carol Watts has pointed out that in his letters to Eliza, Sterne adopts the persona of a Brahmin as an embodiment of benevolence and transcendence, projecting on it the Enlightenment ideal of universal love. However, Sterne was writing at a time when the Indian Brahmin projected a divided image in English culture; it was both scorned as a figure of slavish "self-annihilation" and idolized as a source of wisdom, showing the tensions between imperial ideology and the Enlightenment faith in love (271). By neglecting in his letters England's colonial presence in India, Sterne tacitly condoned the ideology of empire, underscoring the limits of his own sentimental understandings of love. This argument, though incisive, does not capture the complete picture of

Sterne's relations to the East. Sterne's attitudes to India cannot be reduced to the recycling of the Brahmin cliché. In his letters to Eliza, he refers consistently to his physical debilitation and psychic misery, acutely aware of how love, instead of being transcendent, is intimately bound up with death and trauma. Exposing oneself to love often means setting «[one's] wounds a-bleeding every day afresh», revealing one's vulnerability for dissection (150). His identification with the Brahman can be seen as an ironic performance that undercuts the self-serving sentimentality implicit in the ideology of the incipient British empire.

This move is continuous with *Tristram Shandy*, which subverts the very literary sentimentalism that it embodies. Even as it practices sentimentalism, it quietly changes the meaning of the sentimental novel. It not only showcases the possibility of adhering to the noble heart despite social ills, as early sentimental novels tried to do, but also shows the opposite scenarios, the ways in which the diseases of modern society – its warfare and its drive for order and progress – crush the heart, driving it into prolonged melancholy. As the novel employs a digressive narrative to mimic this melancholic mindset, the narrator invokes Confucius as his intellectual ally. Sterne presents Confucius as a haphazard narrator apt to «go backwards and forwards» in telling a story, who helps justify Shandy's effort to lay bare the darker sides of modern life (93). Sterne not only shows the extent to which Asia figured in the minds of English authors whom we traditionally disassociate with international contexts, but also shows how the East was relevant to immanent critiques of the British Empire as it first took shape during the Seven Years' War.

POLITICS OF ENLIGHTENMENT UNIVERSALISM

The literary examples introduced above illustrate what I refer to as Enlightenment universalism, a system of discourses constructing inexact analogies between the religions, ideas, and cultural customs of the West and rest of the world, including in particular the East. Starting from the 16th century, European explorers, missionaries, and merchants brought back to Europe reports of different religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions. The shock of cultural differences that undermined the monolithic, Christian worldview did lead in significant ways to the construction of a hierarchy of civilizations. As numerous scholars from Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze to Silvia Sebastiani have shown, the Enlightenment paved the way for 19th-century nationalism and racism. This prejudice was compounded by the establishment of a

progressive notion of human history, which placed commercial society on the highest level of human civilization. The Enlightenment era was undoubtedly crucial to founding European self-justification on secular and historical rather than on divinely sanctioned reasons.

At the same time, however, Europeans also sought to comprehend the unfamiliar through analogical thinking, approaching the cultural others as structurally similar and epistemologically accessible. From the perspective of world history, the era of European navigations and “discoveries” marked the beginning of globalization, opening the entire world for commercial penetration. This process, however, was not an isolated one. It fell in the wake of the integration of Eurasia that originated in antiquity and increased in the medieval period. Europeans who landed in a city like Surat (the first city that Imlac visits in *Rasselas*) followed in the footsteps of great Islamic and Chinese merchants. Eighteenth-century European writers were not unaware of this. Many of them recognized the temporal and geographical proximity between East and West and embraced the ethos of shapeshifting. The more orthodox Christians traced this similarity to a shared genesis from the Christian God, whereas the religious iconoclasts attributed this similarity to common human conditions, including their embeddedness in the material world. On the one hand, Dutch theologian and classics scholar G.J. Vossius published *De theologia gentili et physiologia Christiana, sive de origine ac progressu idololatriae* (*Gentile Theology and Christian Physiology, or the Origin of the Progression of Idolatry*, 1641) to posit the hypothesis that all human populations descended from Noah and all primitive religions disguise a monotheistic core. On the other, the more radical branches of Enlightenment thought also posited potential communicability between East and West. The deists, for example, alluded systematically to ancient pagan religious beliefs, especially those regarding the soul. Unlike Vossius who sought to establish that pagans formed notions of the immortality of the soul through reason, the deists enlisted pagan beliefs to make the opposite argument, namely that it is impossible to establish the immortality of the soul rationally. Thomas Burnet (with theological ideas close to deism) and John Toland both expressed the belief that transmigration was a mistaken version of the idea of the unceasing transformation of the material world and thus could be incorporated into their own thought (Yang 122).

The same analogical thinking is implied in literary writings. Aside from the examples outlined above, we can also point out Voltaire's various plays (especially *Zaire* and *Mahomet*) and novels, where the author has characters in the East question idolatry and religious

bigotry (to imply that these are problems applicable to both Catholicism and religions in the East) and to argue for the universal validity of a benevolent God. Earlier than that, a more obscure novel written by French writer Simon Tyssot de Patot, titled *Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé* (1707) presents a fictional dialogue between French travelers and the priest of an idealized island country, juxtaposing Spinoza's questioning of the Bible's authority in the late 17th-century Dutch Republic with the natural religion of an unknown island.

Shapeshifting, the ways in which Europeans identify with and morph into their distant counterparts in the East, is a central feature of the early phase of Western modernity. In shapeshifting, the soul is no longer a spiritual substance that unites with a particular body according to the divine will. It moves through different bodies and where it moves is indeterminate, susceptible to human actions and choices. The soul then becomes immanent, emmeshed with the material world, and can enlarge itself through experience, secular learning, and imaginings. The idea of the immanent soul explored and debated in 18th-century European philosophy and fiction was in dialogue with the new religious and political theories that emerged at the turn of the 18th century. Deism and its close relative pantheism both gestured toward a materialist outlook that sees the world as self-organizing and generative of its own essence, not in need of external spiritual forces represented by the transcendent soul. In political philosophy, new theories of sovereignty were also contingent upon the immanent soul. The embodied people, when coming together to form a society, are capable of producing the "general will", which relates to the people as the "soul" relates to the "body" in a private person. Here, I am quoting from Rousseau's *Social Contract* (92). The physicality of the soul was very much a key point of contention in the 18th century: some physiologists associated the cognitive and emotional functions of the soul with the brain and nerves, but most people were simply unsure and adhered to a «synthesis of innatism and naturalism», as Herder and Kant did, believing that the soul gains its knowledge from natural experiences as well as from pre-given mental categories or faculties (Lifshitz 189).

However vague in meaning, the immanent soul signified the possibility that human society can develop viable knowledge and rules through collective practice and reflections thereupon, thus opening the gate for modern transformation. European contact with the East was central to the formation of this new understanding of the soul. For one thing, the idea of transmigration, introduced through Oriental learning and Oriental tales, gave impetus to debates over the status of the soul. More

importantly, Eastern cultures presented both parallels and alternatives that illustrated the viability of the practice of speculating on the unknown through analogy. The various experiments with analogical thinking can be seen as acts of mental shapeshifting illustrating the immanent and dynamic nature of the human soul, and they constitute the core of what I have been referring to as Enlightenment universalism.

Enlightenment universalism, a term often mistakenly equated with naïve beliefs in common humanity, is actually continuous with Jonathan Israel's description of the "radical Enlightenment". For Israel, the "radical Enlightenment" involves strains of thought originating from Spinoza's political and theological theories and criticism of Christian monarchism and emerging Eurocentrism. Having evolved within the context of cultural exchange enabled by the first wave of globalization, Enlightenment universalism is aligned with the radical ethos of critical self-reflections. I have argued that it can be understood to primarily mean two things: 1) Enlightenment thinkers were spurred by their encounter with cultural differences to expand their epistemic paradigms and account for both the convergences and divergences of different nations; and 2) cross-cultural comparisons undertaken in the 18th century not only displayed intriguingly diverse attitudes toward Eastern cultures but also provided an important impetus for the modern transformation of European minds.

CONCLUSION

Compared with 19th-century configurations of East-West relations, 18th-century notions of the East were more fluid, undergirded by strong improvisation and genuine openness. During the romantic period, English, French, and German authors all acquired more knowledge of the East, but it dovetailed with the increasing colonization of the Eastern world, including the conquest of Egypt and the consolidation of the colonization of India. Consequently, the Romantic discussion of the East could not detach itself from imperial geopolitics or (in the case of Germany) ascendant nationalism. In the course of the 19th century, a number of European literary elites extended the tradition of Enlightenment universalism and borrowed in productive manners from the Eastern ethos and poetics. Notable examples would include Judith Gautier's *Le livre de jade* (Paris, 1867), Gustave Flaubert's Carthage novel *Salammbô* (1862), Sainte-Beuve's championing of the 10th-century epic *Shâh Nâmeh* (*Book of Kings*) by the Persian poet Ferdowsi, and Matthew Arnold's borrowing from the epic

in his long narrative poem "Sohrab and Rustum", which highlights its pathos and humanity. But this trend manifested itself much more strongly in the 18th century.

The notion of immanent transcendence, championed in postmodern Western philosophy, originates from the historical moment on which this essay focuses. It first arose from the debates over the soul across 18th-century philosophy and literature and through the ubiquitous literary performances of shapeshifting. Europeans seemingly dismissed the un-Christian belief of transmigration, but actually derived from it a trope of border-crossing possibilities, or shapeshifting, that launched the West onto a path of modernity. The 18th century has a lot more to teach us today than we realize. Trapped in the double bind of hegemony and cultural relativism, it is time we revisit the art of knowing and incorporating the other without muffling its power to shock and change. Comparative literature, more than any other modern discipline, benefits from its flourishing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, J.M. Dent, London 1906, vol. 1.
- Gueullette, Jean-Emile, *Thomas-Simon Gueullette: Un magistrat du XVIIIème siècle, ami des lettres, du théâtre et des plaisirs*, Slatkine Reprints, Genève 1977. Originally printed in 1938.
- Gueullette, Thomas-Simon, *Chinese Tales: Or, the Wonderful Adventures of the Mandarin Fum Hoam*, J. Osborn, London 1740.
- Hunt, Lynn, et al., *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2010.
- Israel, Jonathan, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2002.
- Johnson, Samuel, *Rasselas: Prince of Abyssinia*, T.H. Charter, Boston 1844. Originally published in 1759.
- Lifshitz, Avi, *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2012.
- Lobo, Jerónimo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia, Containing the History, Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical, of that Remote and Unfrequented Country*, Engl. transl. by S. Johnson, Elliot and Kay, London 1789. Originally published in 1733.
- Makdisi, Saree, and Nussbaum, Felicity (eds.), *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2008.
- McMurran, Mary Helen, *The Spread of Novels: Translation and Prose Fiction in the Eighteenth Century*, Princeton U.P., Princeton 2010.
- Raleigh, Tegan, *The Thousand and First Author: Thomas-Simon Gueullette's Repeating Fictions*, «Canadian Review of Comparative Literature», 44, 2017, 4, pp. 701-717.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Social Contract*, Engl. transl. by Christopher Betts, Oxford U.P., Oxford 1994.
- Sterne, Laurence, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, vol. V, T. Becket and P.A. Dehondt, London 1762.
- Sterne, Laurence and Draper, Elizabeth, *The Journal to Eliza and Various Letters*, J.F. Taylor, New York 1904.
- Toury, Gideon, *Pseudotranslations and Their Significance*, in *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 1995, pp. 40-52.
- Voltaire, "Catechisme chinois", in *Dictionnaire philosophique, portatif*, s.e., Londres 1764, pp. 74-93.
- Watts, Carol, *The Cultural Work of Empire: The Seven Years' War and the Imagining of the Shandean State*, Edinburgh U.P., Edinburgh 2007.
- Yang, Chi-ming, *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760*, Johns Hopkins U.P., Baltimore 2011.



Citation: Laine, M. (2025). Rune Stones and Honourable Wounds: The Gothic Idea in Two Eighteenth-Century Swedish Medals. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 79-86. doi: 10.36253/ds-15463

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Rune Stones and Honourable Wounds: The Gothic Idea in Two Eighteenth-Century Swedish Medals

MERIT LAINE

Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract. This paper discusses Northern European antiquity as perceived in Sweden during the Age of Liberty (1720-1771). Two unique medals presented to wounded participants in battles of the Pomeranian war are used as points of departure. The paper argues that the general perception (as opposed to specialist discourse) of Swedish antiquity in this period was based on conceptions of collective past identities, characteristics and practices, rather than specific individuals or events. This perception should be understood as a «networked idea», as defined by Shane Butler: «... what no single text has shown us, but which is seen all the same as residing in the tradition itself...». It is here designated «the Gothic idea», as the Gothic heritage was dominant among its sources. It was closely associated with the harsh natural conditions of the north, which were supposed to produce courageous and war-like inhabitants. Not least in martial and patriotic contexts, the Gothic idea was thus part of masculine self-understanding. It was also referenced in the literary and social culture of the time. However, it was difficult to represent and was thus disproportionately absent from visual and material culture. Rune stones were virtually the only type of object that was both widely familiar and associated with Swedish antiquity. Valued as literary sources, they were alien to eighteenth-century taste, but their depiction on the two medals discussed in this paper demonstrate that, on apparently rare occasions, rune stones were used to visually reference the Gothic idea. Their presence situated both givers and receivers of the medals within a living idea of northern antiquity that had been developed for several centuries (indeed, since antiquity) and, for better and worse, continues to evolve to this day. The development of an iconography that goes far beyond rune stones is part of this later story.

Keywords: Age of Liberty, Gothic Heritage, Networked Idea.

Several, interconnected ancient pasts were of interest to the increasingly global eighteenth century¹. In this article, I will discuss Northern European antiquity as understood in Sweden during the Age of Liberty (1720-1771),

¹ This article draws on research carried out for the project *The Visual Strategies and Court Culture of Adolf Fredrik of Holstein-Gottorp (1710-1771) and Lovisa Ulrika of Prussia (1720-1782), King and Queen of Sweden*, funded by the Berit Wallenberg Foundation, with additional funding from the Åke Wiberg Foundation, and hosted by the Department of Art History at Uppsala University. I am most grateful for their support.

using two medals presented to the wounded of the battles of Pasewalk and Neukalen as my point of departure (figs. 1, 2)². To the eighteenth century, medals were important historical sources, and new specimens were designed with this function in mind – they were to be witnesses of their own time for future generations. However, they were not intended as mere repositories of facts: combinations of motifs and inscriptions allowed for complex messages that presupposed shared knowledge and shared patterns of association but also afforded the pleasures of interpretation and speculation³.

TWO MEDALS FROM THE POMERANIAN WAR

The battles of Pasewalk and Neukalen, fought in 1760 and 1762 respectively, were two rare Swedish victories in the Seven-Year War, or more precisely the Pomeranian War (1757-1762). Both medals were minted on the initiative of officers participating in the war and engraved by Gustaf Ljungberger, considered the foremost Swedish medalist of the time.

The Pasewalk medal shows a miniature landscape comprising a stormy sea, clouds, unyielding cliffs, a cottage, and hardy trees associated with the northern wilderness⁴. The inscriptions read in translation «Fatherland», and on the obverse, «The wounded but not vanquished». Clouds, trees, and a barren ground reappear on the Neukalen medal, here combined with the words «For the fatherland» and on the obverse «Honourable wounds». Both medals also include rune stones, which in the eighteenth century were the most familiar artefacts of Swedish antiquity. The runes are unreadable, but the stones are accurately represented: they have characteristic flat surfaces, upstanding formats, and uneven edges, and the pseudo-runes are arranged within a typical band-like framework (fig. 3). The stone on the Neukalen medal (fig. 2) also includes a symbol reminiscent of a templar cross – a detail to be found on many rune stones, which here may also be a masonic allusion, given that many officers were members of lodges⁵. On this



Figs. 1, 2. Gustaf Ljungberger, Medals distributed after the battles of 1), Pasewalk (1760) and 2), Neukalen (1762). Stralsund. Silver, diam. 31 and 29 mm respectively. The National Historical Museums, Stockholm. Photo Ann Nordlöf/SHM (CC BY-SA 4.0).

² B.E. Hildebrand, *Sveriges och svenska konungahusets minnespenningar, praktmynt och belöningsmedaljer*, Kongl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm 1875, vol. II, pp. 103-105, nrs Adolf Fredrik 32, 33. For Swedish medals, see Y. Haidenthaller, *The Medal in Early Modern Sweden: Significances and Practices*, Föreningen mediehistoriskt arkiv, Lund 2021.

³ Haidenthaller, *Medal*, cit., p. 8; M. Laine, *En Minerva för vår Nord: Lovisa Ulrika som samlare, beställare och uppdragsgivare*, Uppsala universitet, Uppsala 1998, pp. 43-44.

⁴ K. Neville, *The Land of Goths and Vandals: The Visual Presentation of Gothicism at the Swedish court, 1550-1700*, «Renaissance Studies», 27, 2012, 3, pp. 435-459: pp. 451, 455.

⁵ A. Önnfors, *Frimureriets moraliska kosmos*, in *Mystiskt brödraskap*

– mäktigt nätverk: *Studier i det svenska 1700-talsfrimureriet*, ed. by A. Önnfors, *Avdelningen för idé och lärdoms historia vid Lunds universitet*, Lund 2006, pp. 37-98: pp. 38-39. For the crosses see E. Dahlberg, *Antiquarianism, Politics, and Self-Fashioning in Magnus Rönnow's Poem Scanicae Runae cum Ense Thosiöensi (1716)*, in *Boreas Rising: Antiquarianism and National Narratives in 17th and 18th-century Scandinavia*, ed. by B. Roling and B. Schirg, De Gruyter, Berlin and Boston 2019, pp. 129-150: pp. 139-142.

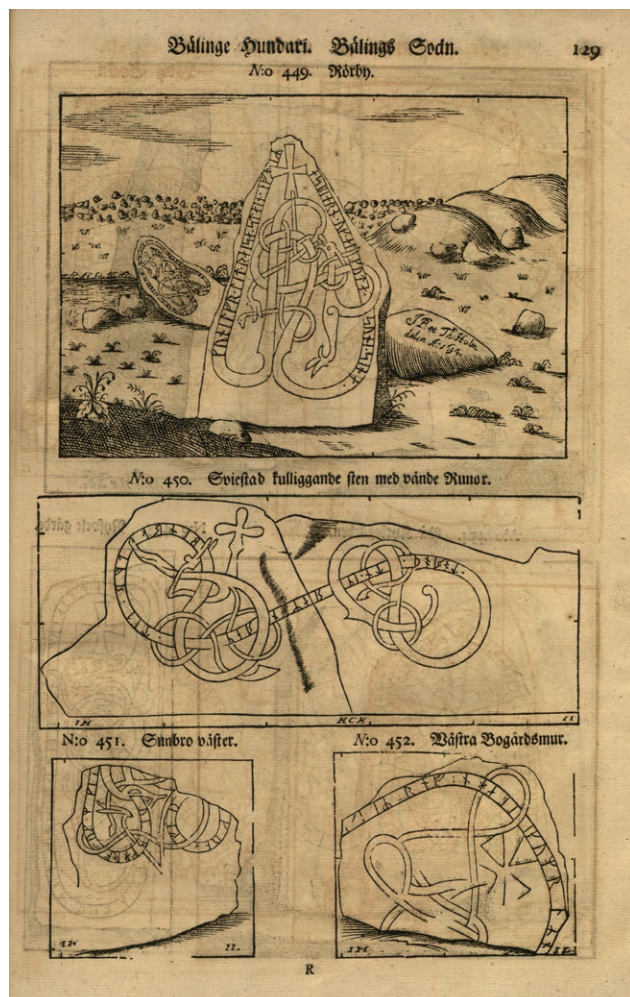


Fig. 3. Rune stones at Rörby, illustration in J. Göransson, *Bautil* (1750). Woodcut, signed, J P: et Th: Holm delin. A: 1694. <https://digital.ub.umu.se/resolve?urn=urn:17a_000068:0158> (06/2024).

stone, there is also a small ship that was surely intended to recall the Viking raids that were already well-established in the perception of Sweden's ancient history. The ship was copied from *Bautil* (1750), a complete, illustrated catalogue of the Swedish rune stones that also included a few other ancient objects and monuments⁶. The sword on the Neukalen medal may be a simplified version of a supposedly ancient weapon depicted in the same publication, while also referencing the Swedish Order of the Sword and emphasising the martial context.

⁶ J. Göransson, *Bautil, det är: alle Svea ok Götha rikets runstenar, upreste ifrån verldens år 2000 til Christi år 1000...*, Lars Salvius, Stockholm 1750, pp. 313 (ship), 319 (sword). <https://digital.ub.umu.se/resolve?urn=urn:17a_000068> (06/2024). For the sword see Dahlberg, *Antiquarianism*, cit., pp. 133, 144.

THE GOTHIC IDEA IN THE AGE OF LIBERTY

The complicated and in part contested early modern perceptions of Swedish antiquity rested on biblical, classical, and Icelandic sources as well as later theories and research⁷. The first kings were believed to be descendants of Noah's grandson Magog, and early inhabitants were identified with the Hyperboreans as well as with the Scythians and the Goths (sometimes interchangeable), which were connected to, among other peoples, the Amazons and the Massagetae. These traditions, the Aesir, and the classical past were united in the writings of Snorri Sturluson, who euhemeristically identified the Aesir god Odin as a refugee Trojan who came with his people to Scandinavia⁸. Icelandic medieval texts were used as historical sources from the 16th century onwards, and in the following century were increasingly also appropriated as remains of the literary culture of Sweden's ancient past⁹. During the second half of the seventeenth century, the claims for the antiquity and prestige of this past increased, culminating with Olof Rudbeck the Elder's identification of Sweden with Atlantis and hence the source of European civilization.

Bautil's author Johan Göransson was among the few scholars of the Age of Liberty who defended Rudbeck's theories, but many more, including sceptical historians such as Olof von Dalin and Sven Lagerbring, accepted the historical truth of the Gothic heritage and mined Icelandic texts for information on the religion, laws and

⁷ The summary above is of necessity very simplified. See for recent overviews of the European context K. Enenkel and K. Ottenheim, *The Quest for an Appropriate Past: The Creation of National Identities in Early Modern Literature, Scholarship, Architecture, and Art*, in *The Quest for an Appropriate Past in Literature, Art, and Architecture*, ed. by K. Enenkel and K. Ottenheim, Brill, Leiden 2019, pp. 1-12; K. Neville: *Gothicism and Early Modern Historical Ethnography*, «Journal of the History of Ideas», 70, 2009, 2, pp. 213-234; *The Art and Culture of Scandinavian Central Europe 1550-1720*, Pennsylvania State University, University Park 2019, pp. 13-28. For the Age of Liberty see e.g. Anttila, *Power*, cit., pp. 247-305; contributions to Boreas, cit.; L. Gustafsson, *Fornnordisk mytologi och mentalitet: en Uppsala-dissertation om «Eddorna» 1735 och kontinuiteten mellan göticism och nordisk renässans*, in *Gudar på jorden: Festskrift till Lars Lönnroth*, ed. by S. Hansson and M. Malm, Symposium, Eslöv 2000, pp. 215-224; M. Legné, *Fäderneslandets rätta beskrivning: mötet mellan antikvarisk forskning och ekonomisk nyttokult i 1700-talets Sverige*, Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, Helsingfors 2004, pp. 48-79; J. Nordin, *Ett fattigt med fritt folk: Nationell och politisk självbild i Sverige från sen stormaktstid till slutet av frihetstiden*, Symposium, Eslöv 2000, pp. 218-229; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., pp. 169-222.

⁸ R.W. Rix, *Oriental Odin: Tracing the East in Northern Culture and Literature*, «History of European Ideas», 36, 2009, 1, pp. 47-60: pp. 48-50 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2009.10.006>> (06/2024).

⁹ Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., pp. 85-99, 140-156; Widenberg, *Fäderneslandets*, cit., pp. 168-172.

culture of ancient Sweden¹⁰. In 1755, the even more sceptical Queen Lovisa Ulrika set the query Why have the Goths left no rune stones in Spain or Italy? as a subject for the yearly competition of the Royal Academy of Letters¹¹. This question, based on the premise of a shared Gothic past, confirms that Swedish antiquity remained a relevant topic for research and debate.

However, I suggest that the general perception of Swedish antiquity in the Age of Liberty (as opposed to specialist discourse among historians and antiquarians), did not depend on specific authorities or sources, or considered opinions about, for example, chronology, the age of the runic alphabet or the Sagas as historical documents. Rather, this perception should be understood as a «networked idea», as defined by Shane Butler: «... what no single text has shown us, but which is seen all the same as residing in the tradition itself...»¹². As indicated above, this tradition had many sources, but the Gothic heritage was dominant, and I will therefore refer to it as «the Gothic idea». While not a dominant feature of Age of Liberty culture, it was nevertheless a familiar one, and appeared in serious as well as occasional poetry, speeches, jokes, toasts, political satire, emblems, and letters, and provided subject matter for the first classicist tragedies in the Swedish language¹³. The Gothic idea had

a stable core but was subject to varying interpretations and evaluations. For instance, Odin could be acclaimed as «to us a Romulus and a Numa» or be regarded as a corruptor of the virtuous Scythians; some celebrated the war-like nature of the ancient Swedes, while others condemned it or sought to tone it down¹⁴. The Gothic idea provided material for the feminist poet Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht, who described a beautiful army of women committed to conquest, glory and cruelty, and brides who preferred steel to women's garments¹⁵. Other writers, including Dalin in his play *Brunhilda* (1738), were negative towards the tradition of warrior women, but both interpretations, like the medals discussed here, presupposed a perception of the ancient Swedes as a war-like people. While Nordenflycht praised the martial heritage in some contexts, she described it in negative terms in others, which further demonstrates the versatility and wide rhetoric possibilities of the Gothic idea¹⁶.

Interest in Swedish antiquity also found expression in amateur archaeological excavations, popular at court as well as in elite and clerical circles¹⁷. Objects with runes were appreciated collectables – in Sweden and abroad – and creating new ones, most often in the form of rune calendars, became a popular pastime¹⁸. A further instance is a few blades for dress swords inscribed with runes, dating from the 1750s. The runic alphabet or futhark was thus not the preserve of scholarly experts,

¹⁰ Gustafsson, *Fornnordisk*, cit., pp. 219–223; Malm, *Minervas*, cit., p. 15; Nordin, *Fattigt*, cit., pp. 220–222; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., pp. 101–108, 176–210.

¹¹ Stålmarck, Torkel, *De vittra tävlingarna i «Drottningens akademi»*, in *Drottning Lovisa Ulrika och vitterhetsakademien*, ed. by S.Å. Nilsson, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm 2003, pp. 115–135: p. 128. For Lovisa Ulrika see her letter to Sophie Dorothea, Dowager Queen of Prussia, 20/11 1747, in *Luise Ulrike, die schwedische Schwester Friedrichs des grossen: Ungedruckte Briefe an Mitglieder des preussischen Königshauses*, ed. by F. Arnheim, vol. II, Perthes, Gotha 1910, p. 83; for the Spanish-Swedish Gothic connection I. Söhrman, *Gothicism – the final flourish of a long history*, in *Relaciones entre Espana y Suecia desde mediados del siglo XVII hasta comienzos del XIX*, ed. by K. Benson, M. Mörner and I. Söhrman, Avdelningen för spanska vid Göteborgs universitet, Göteborg 2002, pp. 187–220.

¹² S. Butler, *Homer's Deep*, in *Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception*, ed. by S. Butler, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2016, pp. 22–48 and p. 39. The work of earlier antiquarians provided a foundation: «... a picture developed of an ethnic formation in which people who called themselves Swedes – Svea and Goths – shared a common origin, historical memory, cultural characteristics (not least language) and associations with a special territory...» (Widenberg, *Fäderneslandets*, cit., p. 258). See also Nordin, *Fattigt*, cit., p. 229.

¹³ L. Breitholz, *Studier i Frihetstidens litteratur*, Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet, Uppsala 1956, pp. 27–46; M. Laine, *Forntid på lek och allvar. Om Adolf Fredriks och Lovisa Ulrikas intresse för Sveriges äldsta historia*, in *Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens årsbok* 1999, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm 1999, pp. 171–183: pp. 174–175; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., p. 101. A few instances in letters are C.C. Gjörrwell to S. Baelter 4/7 1758, and to C.G. Warmholtz, 30/3 1759, both MS in the Swedish National Library, Stockholm, KB H Ep G 8:1; Lovisa Ulrika to Sophie Dorothea, 16 January, 3 and 27 February 1749, in *Luise Ulrike*, cit., pp. 153, 453.

The tragedies are O. Celsius the Younger, *Ingeborg* (1737) and O. von Dalin, *Brunhilda* (1738).

¹⁴ J. Ixel, Speech on the occasion of Queen Lovisa Ulrika's birthday, 1755, MS in Lund University Library, De la Gardieska arkivet, Cod. XII: a 14, fol. 34–36; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., pp. 193–194, 203–204.

¹⁵ H.E. Nordenflycht, *Den frälsta Swea* (1746), in H.E. Nordenflycht, *Samlade skrifter*, ed. by H. Borelius, vol. II, Svenska Vitterhetssamfundet, Stockholm 1927, pp. 240–271: p. 242; H.E. Nordenflycht, *Defence of the Female Sex against J.J. Rousseau, citizen of Geneva* (1761), ed. by E. Mansén, transl. A. Crozier, Ellerström, Lund 2016, p. 22. For Nordenflycht see in English E. Mansén, *Introduction*, in *Defence*, cit., pp. 3–7. See also Dahlberg, *Antiquarianism*, cit., pp. 137–138; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., pp. 201–202.

¹⁶ E.g. H.E. Nordenflycht, *Tåget öfver Bält*, in *Vitterhetsarbeten I* (1759), ed. T. Stålmarck, Svenska Vitterhetssamfundet, Stockholm 1990, pp. 1–17; *De gamla götars tal til de närvarande krigsbussar. Wid et echac-spel*, in *Samlade*, cit., pp. 174–182; *Den frälsta*, cit., p. 242.

¹⁷ O.W. Jensen, *Earthy Practice: Towards a History of Excavation in Sweden, in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, «Current Swedish Archaeology», 12, 2004, pp. 61–82: pp. 65–68; Laine, *Forntid*, cit., pp. 172–174; M. Magnusson Karlsson, *En fornälskares utgrävning: En studie av den tidiga arkeologin i Sverige*, unpublished BA thesis, Dept of Archaeology, Uppsala University Campus Gotland 2017, <http://www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:1107830/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (06/2024)

¹⁸ M. Clunies Ross, *An Anglo-Saxon Runic Coin and its Adventures in Sweden*, «Anglo-Saxon England», 32, 2003, pp. 79–88: pp. 84–87; A. Hirsjärvi, *Svenska kalenderklingor från 1700-talets mitt*, «Livrustkammaren: Journal of the Royal Armoury», 5, 1950, pp. 45–48; Jensen, *Earthy*, cit., p. 67; *Luise Ulrike*, cit., pp. 153, 453. The blades are in the Royal Armoury, Stockholm, inv. no: s LRK 15/147 and 2071.

though the ability to read it was a comparatively rare accomplishment¹⁹.

THE SWEDISH LANGUAGE AND THE GOTHIC IDEA

Like medals, rune stones had commemorative functions. In his introduction to the first volume of the transactions of the Royal Academy of Letters (1755), Dalin explained that the ancient Swedes presented truths and morals through emblems, poetry and riddles – also like medals²⁰. In the Pasewalk and Neukalen medals, the modern Swedish and the pseudo-runic inscriptions indicated further supposed connections between the past and the eighteenth-century present modes of communication. The pseudo-runes represented the ancient Swedish language, which was the origin of its modern counterpart, just as the Goths were the origin of the Swedes²¹. In the past, both the people and their language were manly and direct – qualities that were also considered desirable in the Age of Liberty patriotic discourse on masculinity.

Conservative writers and translators sought to (re) introduce words found in Icelandic texts and thereby bring contemporary Swedish closer to its supposed origins²². While this in general met with limited success, using such words was an effective means to allude to the Gothic idea. An example is Nordenflycht's epic poem *The Crossing of the Belt* (*Tåget öfwer Bält*), written for the 1753 competition of the Royal Academy of Letters²³. It describes the march of the Swedish army in 1658 across the frozen Belt strait between Sweden and Denmark and uses archaic words and Norse mythology to present the soldiers and their king and commander Karl X Gustav as latter-day Goths, willing to risk their lives in battle and on the treacherous ice. The pseudo-runic inscriptions on the medals should be understood as a pictorial approximation of such verbal allusions, though only able

to represent ancient Swedish as a general concept. Nordenflycht also mentions (non-existent) monuments to the march across the ice inscribed with runes, thus, like the medals, connecting past and present deeds, past and present memorials.

NATURE, LIBERTY, AND THE GOTHIC IDEA

In early modern perceptions, the history of the northern Goths was inextricably intertwined with the climate and unyielding nature in which these people lived²⁴. Swedish nature as «a stark and unforgiving land» has consequently been interpreted as a defining continuity connecting past and present²⁵. Particularly clear interpretations of this idea were the landscapes depicted in the publication *Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna* (in progress 1661-1715), intended to present the glories of Sweden to an international audience. Here, as noted by Kristoffer Neville, northern topography and antiquity were mutually reinforcing, particularly when places associated with cults or other ancient practices were represented. The woodcuts of the above-mentioned publication *Bautil* (fig. 3) were less ambitious than the *Suecia* engravings, but largely date from the same period (though published later) and have similar traits. A few *Bautil* images included topographical views, and many others indicated a bare, rocky ground with a few tufts of grass. In the Pasewalk and Neukalen medals, comparable conventions were used to represent northern nature, which thus not only served as the setting for the rune stones or as a general geographical indication, but also expressed the Gothic idea. As characterised by the antiquarian Johan Peringskiöld in 1719, nature and antiquity were both embodied in the rune stones. Made of northern granite, they were more enduring than marble, and thus preserved for all eternity the names and deeds of the warlike heroes of the ancient Goths²⁶.

A further trait associated with the north was love of liberty.²⁷ In his epic *Liberty* (1735), the Scottish poet James Thomson described how the Scandinavians «... by keener air/their genius purged, and tempered hard by frost...» received Liberty as she fled from the oppres-

¹⁹ Luise Ulrike, cit., p. 153. For Swedish runology up to the 1770s, see K. Östlund, *Johan Ihre on the Origins and History of the Runes: Three Latin Dissertations from the Mid 18th Century*, Uppsala universitet, Uppsala 2000, pp. 26-30.

²⁰ O. von Dalin, *Inledning*, in «Kongl. Svenska Vitterhetsacademiens handlingar», vol. I, Lars Salvius, Stockholm 1755, pp. 15-38: p. 16.

²¹ V. Johanterwage, *She «lät illa i sömnen»? How Eric Julius Björner can still be read with profit and even delight*, in *Apotheosis*, cit., pp. 107-135: pp. 117, 132; Malm, *Minervas*, cit., pp. 185-186; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., pp. 153, 154, 186, 209.

²² A.H. Hannesdottir, *Svenskt och osvenskt i 1700-talets svenska ordböcker*, in *Nationalism och nationell identitet i 1700-talets Sverige*, ed. by Å. Karlsson and B. Lindberg, Uppsala Universitet, Uppsala 1999, pp. 87-99: 91, 95, 98; Johanterwage, *Hon lät*, cit., pp. 109, 117, 119-122, 130-131; Malm *Minervas*, cit., pp. 185, 196; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., p. 101.

²³ Nordenflycht, *Tåget*, cit., reference to runes p. 12. See also Stålmarck, *De vittra*, cit., pp. 120-121.

²⁴ See e.g. Eriksson, *Atlantic*, cit., pp. 105-107; C. Frängsmyr, *Klimat och karaktär: Naturen och människan i sent svenskt 1700-tal*, Natur & Kultur, Stockholm 2000; Neville, *Land*, cit.; Nordin, *Fattigt*, cit., pp. 236, 263; Wallette, *Sagans*, cit., p. 210.

²⁵ Neville, *Antiquarianism without Antiques: Topographical Evidence and the Formation of the Past*, in *Boreas*, cit., pp. 82-101: pp. 85-91; Neville, *Land of Goths*, cit., pp. 438, 451, 455-459; Neville, *Art*, cit., quote p. 25.

²⁶ Legné, *Fäderneslandets*, cit., p. 56.

²⁷ Frängsmyr, *Klimat*, cit.

sion of the declining Roman empire²⁸. Similar ideas were transmitted by Montesquieu, who considered that a cold climate and an infertile, mountainous habitat bred vigorous, courageous, warlike, and frank defenders of liberty²⁹. This perception was particularly appealing to Swedish elites in this period when the constitution represented a jealously guarded rudimentary parliamentarism. Ancient history, northern nature, and liberty as embedded in the Gothic idea emerge clearly in the initial verses of Gustaf Fredrik Gyllenborg's *Winter Poem* (*Winter-Qvæde*, 1759)³⁰. Gyllenborg carried this theme into the present, exhorting his contemporaries to ensure that Sweden, the mother of heroes, should never become the miserable abode of slaves. It seems likely that this aspect of the Gothic idea also informed the medals so that the «honourable wounds» referred to in the Neukalen inscription were received not only for the fatherland but also for its liberty.

PICTURING THE GOTHIC IDEA

Given the importance of the Gothic tradition in seventeenth-century Swedish political and scholarly contexts we might expect it to have had a similar place in visual and material culture. Yet this was not the case: direct representations were rare, except for antiquarian renderings of the material remains of the past³¹. In the Age of Liberty, the foremost arbiter of taste Carl Gustaf Tessin repudiated the «heavy piles of stone of the ancient Goths», while Dalin considered that the ancient Swedes

did not know how to paint or design³². The development of a style expressing the Gothic idea was thus hardly possible, for aesthetic reasons. However, this does not explain the scarcity of pictorial subjects taken from the Gothic tradition, as such subjects would not require an authentic style, only a recognizable iconography. While the archaeological evidence and pictorial traditions available were unpromising as sources for such an iconography³³, I suggest that the most important explanation can be found in how pictorial art, as well as poetry, conveyed meaning. In turn, this explanation contributes to an understanding of the choice of rune stones as motifs for the medals.

Specific heroes, gods, or occurrences of Swedish antiquity were rare not only in seventeenth-century visual culture but also in poetry. Furthermore, the deities that appeared with any frequency in literary texts were those that could be directly translated into a classical counterpart, such as Frigga/Fröja/Venus/Aphrodite, and these were usually inserted into a classical context. Stina Hansson concludes that Norse mythology was too unfamiliar: «... the repertoire that the poets were able to refer to, and their readers interpret, was not Nordic or Swedish but classical or biblical»³⁴. This unfamiliarity extended to history: for example, despite attempts, ancient Swedish exempla could not replace those found in classical or biblical traditions³⁵. Hansson's conclusions are equally valid for the visual arts, where the construction of meaning depended on well-known concepts, individuals, and events that could be alluded to through familiar symbols, such as the owl of Minerva or the trumpet of Fame.

In the Age of Liberty, Swedish antiquity was hardly more well-known than in the previous era, and classical equivalents were still used to explain unfamiliar allusions. An example is the translation of Montesquieu's *Le temple de Gnide* (1725) into *The Temple of Fröja* (*Fröjas tempel*, 1759), in which Venus and Fröja are interchangeable, and which otherwise has no Nordic content³⁶. Yet the desire to introduce the ancient Swedish past confirms that such allusions were meaningful, as emerges clearly in the above-mentioned *The Crossing of the Belt*. Nordenflycht used several solutions to make her poem work, factually as well as poetically³⁷.

²⁸ J. Thomson, *Liberty* (1735), in *The Poetical Works of James Thomson*, William Pickering, London 1830, vol. II, p. 157; D.M. Wilson, *The Viking Age in British Literature in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, in *The Waking of Angantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture*, ed. by E. Roesdahl and P. Meulengracht Sørensen, Aarhus University, Aarhus 1996, pp. 58-71; pp. 59-61.

²⁹ P.A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, Yale University, New Haven (CT) 2009, pp. 156, 164, 173-174.

³⁰ G.F. Gyllenborg, *Winter-Qvæde*, in *Witterhetsarbeten I*, cit., pp. 34-47; pp. 35-36; Breitholtz, *Studier*, cit., pp. 47-56. In earlier periods, liberty was associated with freedom from foreign rule and the peasant's freedom from serfdom; in the Age of Liberty, it was primarily understood as freedom from absolute rule.

³¹ See for the seventeenth century e.g. R. Josephson, *Det hyperboreiska Upsala*, «Svenska humanistiska förbundets skrifter», 51, 1940; B. Magnusson and J. Nordin, *Drömmen om stormakten: Erik Dahlbergs Sverige*, Medströms, Stockholm 2015, pp. 128-131; J. Nordin, *Spirit of the Age: Erik Dahlberg's Images of Sweden's Past*, in *Boreas*, cit., pp. 103-105. Of Kristoffer Neville's studies see e.g. *Land*, cit.; *Antiquarianism*, cit. Gothic traits in the visual culture of the Age of Liberty are little studied, but see T. Göransson, *Ättehögen i 1600- och 1700-talets svenska gravkonst*, «Tidskrift för konstvetenskap», 30, 1957, pp. 187-209; M. Olausson, *Den engelska parken i Sverige under gustaviansk tid*, Piper, Stockholm 1993, pp. 341-342, Laine, *Forntid*, cit.

³² C.G. Tessin, *En Gammal Mans Bref Til en Ung Printz*, vol. II, Lars Salvius, Stockholm 1756, p. 303; Dalin, *Inledning*, cit., p. 20.

³³ As noted in Neville, *Land*, cit., pp. 441-445.

³⁴ S. Hansson, *Gudar, repertoar och svenskhet: Exemplet Lucidor*, in *Gudar*, cit., pp. 403-414; pp. 408-414, quote p. 412.

³⁵ Hansson, *Gudar*, cit., p. 406. Swedish exempla were suggested in J. Scheferus, *Memorabilium Sueticae gentis exemplorum liber singularis* (1671).

³⁶ *Fröjas tempel*, in *Witterhetsarbeten*, cit., pp. 176-230.

³⁷ Nordenflycht, *Tåget*, cit., p. 10 (Äge), and 8-10 (Bore and Bore's breath).

The Norse sea god Äge was one of several phenomena explained through classical parallels inserted in footnotes, in his case consisting of the single word «Nep-tune». Other footnotes provided modern synonyms, such as «chief» for «visur». Bore as the god or personification of winter on the other hand did not have a classical counterpart and could not be explained by a single word. His appearance and icy abode in the far north thus became the subject of an ekphrastic description that emphasised the central role of the cold in the poem and explained Bore's powers and weapons, including the north wind. This was described as the breath of Bore – a simile that also required a footnote.

Literary difficulties of this kind might seem to contradict the familiarity and relevance of the Gothic idea that I argued above. But the point is rather that this idea consisted of general concepts that alluded to collective past identities, qualities and practices, not to a specific mythology or set of historical persons and occurrences. When Nordenflycht referred to the proud, courageous army of the Goths, and even its female counterpart, or claimed that victories would be commemorated with runic inscriptions, no annotation was necessary³⁸.

The range of familiar pictorial allusions was narrower than the verbal, and could not be supplemented with footnotes or other explanations. For instance, the Gothic army was a concept without a corresponding, recognizable image. Pictorial translations between classical and Norse mythologies would not have worked – if the symbols that identified Venus were used, the depicted female body would be Venus, not Fröja. The rune stones on the other hand were familiar and unequivocally associated with Swedish antiquity. Their very existence in the landscape, or occasionally as spolia in later buildings, served as proof of and sign for the authenticity of the Gothic past: it was fact, not legend. The rune stones, and the futhark as such, furthermore shared the versatility of the Gothic idea, so that they could visualise this idea in a multitude of contexts. As we have seen, particular aspects of the Gothic idea could be invoked by the choice of allusions in texts. The Neukalen and Pasewalk medals exemplify how a similar effect could be achieved pictorially. The ship suggesting Viking raids, the sword, the inscriptions, the Nordic nature and the context for which the medals were intended, all affirmed and celebrated the war-like and masculine aspects of the Gothic idea, but it was the rune stones that visualised the idea as such.

CONCLUSION AND POSTSCRIPT

In the Age of Liberty, Sweden had lost its position as a great European power, but this loss was not seen as permanent. Many considered that territory and international standing should be recovered through warfare, and notions of courage as a national virtue and war as the natural occupation for Swedes were put forward as arguments for the feasibility of such a strategy³⁹. This attitude provides the background for the medals and for the literary, visual, and social culture that sustained the martial interpretation of the Gothic idea. This interpretation was even more important in the seventeenth century, and its survival demonstrates the continuity with the previous era in the self-understanding of especially the officers of the Age of Liberty⁴⁰. The hitherto overlooked Pasewalk and Neukalen medals contribute to our understanding of the Gothic idea in this period and confirm its continued validity. While the martial interpretation of this idea was widespread, the medals were commissioned and distributed in a context that brought a scholarly, antiquarian, and literary tradition uniquely close to real warfare.

In the Gustavian period (1772-1809), the Gothic idea became increasingly visible, but in a manner considerably more eclectic than previously. In the stage designs, carousels and landscape parks of Gustav III and his brothers, northern antiquity, including rune stones, were mixed with references to ancient Egypt, classical antiquity, medieval chivalry, freemasonry and mysticism. Following the deposition of Gustav IV Adolf in 1809, the French marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte was chosen as heir to the Swedish throne. Nine years later, he ascended the throne as Karl XIV Johan. Proving very talented in the art of royal self-presentation, he launched himself as a new Odin, thus breathing life into the interpretation of the Norse god as a human, wise, and benevolent immigrant ruler⁴¹. The arrival of Bernadotte coincided with a

³⁹ M. Roberts, *The Age of Liberty: Sweden 1719-1772*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, pp. 30-31; Nordin, *Fattigt*, cit., pp. 367-370.

⁴⁰ G. Artéus, *Krigsmakt och samhälle i Frihetstidens Sverige*, Militärhistoriska avdelningen vid Militärhögskolan, Stockholm 1982, pp. 385-389; M. Laine, 1720-1809, in *Konst och visuell kultur i Sverige I: Före 1809*, ed. by L. Johannesson, Signum, Stockholm 2007, pp. 259-335: pp. 320-328; Nordin, *Fattigt*, cit., p. 179.

⁴¹ See for the Gustavian period e.g. Laine, 1720-1809, cit., pp. 263-264 and references; J. Mjöberg, *Drömmen om sagatiden*, Natur och Kultur, Stockholm 1967, vol. I, *passim*; Olausson, *Gustavianska*, cit., *passim*; for Karl XIV Johan e.g. contributions to *En dynasti blir till: Medier, myter och makt kring Karl XIV Johan och familjen Bernadotte*, ed. by N. Ekedahl, Norstedts, Stockholm 2010, and references; Laine, C., *Rosendal: Scenrum och sommarnöje för en dynasti*, in *Broderfokenes vel=Brödrafolkens väl: Unionen 1814-1905*, Livrustkammren, Stockholm 2005, pp. 43-54; Mjöberg, *Drömmen*, cit., *passim*.

³⁸ Nordenflycht, *Tåget*, cit., pp. 3-5, 11-12; *Defence*, cit., p. 22.

new Gothic movement which called for a visual art with subjects taken from northern antiquity⁴². Norse mythology and the Vikings took precedence over the older traditions, and a coherent iconography for these subjects began to develop, expressing the converging interests of the king and his subjects (fig. 4). In the later nineteenth century, the cultural perception of Swedish antiquity would lose its international connections and increasingly emphasize the supposedly unique character that was already implied by the perception of northern nature as the source of manly, war-like virtues.



Fig. 4 Carl Stefan Bennet, *The Studio of Bengt Fogelberg in Rome*. Ca 1830. Oil on canvas, 42x35 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Photo Cecilia Heisser (CC BY-SA 4.0). Fogelberg is portrayed with his statue of Odin, commissioned by Karl XIV Johan and delivered in 1830.

⁴² E.G. Geijer, *Betraktelser i afseende på de Nordiska Mythernes användande i skön konst*, «Iduna» 7, 1817.



Citation: Ouanada, H. (2025). A l'école des Anciens: le cas de Térence le Carthaginois. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 87-92. doi: 10.36253/ds-15457

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

A l'école des Anciens : le cas de Térence le Carthaginois¹

HALIMA OUANADA

Université de Tunis El Manar, Tunisia

Abstract. In this article, we aim to explore the role of Antiquity in the construction of the Enlightenment and in the process of reconstructing the Western world. However, rather than addressing all the sources that fueled debates, provoked controversies, and sharpened minds during the Enlightenment, we will focus our attention on a hybrid author who left a lasting impact on writers of the 17th and 18th centuries: Terence, the Carthaginian-born comic poet. A devoted reader, translator, and ardent admirer of the one whose noble comedy foreshadows the “serious genre,” Diderot speaks highly of him. What particularly distinguishes this Carthaginian is the message of tolerance conveyed through his plays, and, more specifically, the central role he places on education as the essential means to instill the values of civility and humanitas in younger generations.

Keywords: Térence, Theatre, Enlightenment, Diderot, Foreign Sources, Report Orient/Occident.

« Si Voltaire, Diderot et Rousseau ou leurs mânes peuvent prétendre à une forme de survie, c'est évidemment grâce à une œuvre diffusée aujourd'hui dans le monde entier et grâce à une pensée indiscutablement élaborée “à l'école des Anciens” »². En effet, l'Antiquité gréco-romaine a toujours été pour les auteurs du XVIII^e siècle un réservoir où ils ont puisé l'essentiel de leurs idées et réflexions sur tout ce qui concerne l'homme et la vie. La *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* en est un incontestable témoignage. Matrice de toute création, cette Antiquité a indiscutablement servi de fondement à l'esthétique classique et à la création littéraire des esprits éclairés de l'époque en quête du sublime antique³ suivant le principe de l'*imitatio*, d'*ae-mulatio* et de *comparatio*.

¹ Ce texte reprend l'essentiel du discours prononcé en tant que conférencière invitée lors du Congrès international des études de dix-huitiémistes à Rome en 2023, et il a aussi fait l'objet d'une publication par l'Association Tunisienne des Etudes sur les Lumières (ATEL) dans *Les Sources étrangères des Lumières occidentales*, éditions Arabesques, 2024. Ce texte, légèrement remanié, est désormais publié aux côtés des interventions des autres conférenciers-ères invité-es ayant participé au congrès.

² Nous empruntons cette expression au titre de l'ouvrage de L. Pernot, *À l'école des Anciens. Professeurs, élèves et étudiants, précédé d'un entretien avec Jacqueline de Romilly*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2008.

³ H. Ouanada, *La Femme chez Voltaire*, Arabesque, Tunis 2011 (publication de l'Unité de Recherche « Femme et Méditerranée », FSHS de Tunis ; prix national Zoubeida B'chir des études en langues françaises 2011), p. 32.

Cependant, il serait réducteur de s'en tenir uniquement à la référence gréco-romaine, en négligeant l'apport d'autres sources étrangères qui, grâce aux dynamiques de traduction, ont également servi de modèles, de points de référence voire de contrepoints constants aux constructions politiques, institutionnelles, juridiques et philosophiques de l'Occident. Légions sont les écrivains qui à travers le monde ont contribué à l'émancipation de l'humanité en favorisant le dialogue entre les traditions intellectuelles occidentales et orientales. Même si, il faut l'avouer, l'historiographie occidentale dominée par l'eurocentrisme, demeure responsable de l'occultation systématique des apports d'autres civilisations et de l'influence déterminante des savoirs non occidentaux dans la formation de la pensée moderne, en particulier ceux issus du monde arabo-islamique, longtemps relégués aux marges du récit historique dominant.

Il importe aujourd'hui de dépasser l'idée, encore tenace chez certains spécialistes du XVIII^e siècle, selon laquelle les Lumières seraient exclusivement l'œuvre des seuls philosophes européens de cette époque. Il convient plutôt de repenser les Lumières dites « occidentales » comme un processus intellectuel pluriel, nourri par des apports multiples venus d'horizons culturels divers. « Quand on étudie leurs écrits, on constate que les penseurs des Lumières convenaient souvent de manière explicite que leurs idées trouvaient leurs sources en dehors de ce que nous nommons aujourd'hui la « tradition occidentale »⁴, remarque David Graeber.

C'est, nous semble-t-il, ce déficit de reconnaissance des influences extérieures dans l'élaboration des idéaux modernes qui continue, encore aujourd'hui d'alimenter les sentiments de méfiance, de rejet, voire d'hostilité envers l'Occident et les valeurs qu'il prétend incarner. D'où l'urgence de restituer aux Lumières la diversité des voix qui les ont façonnées, en les concevant non comme un corpus figé, mais comme un espace dynamique de confrontation, de circulation, de débat et de tolérance.

1. TÉRENCE, UN AUTEUR HYBRIDE, SYMBOLE DU MULTICULTURALISME

Il ne s'agit nullement ici de prétendre épuiser l'ensemble des sources ayant nourri les débats, suscité les controverses ou stimulé la pensée critique à l'époque des Lumières. Nous nous concentrerons plutôt sur une figure singulière, à la croisée des cultures, dont l'œuvre a profondément marqué les esprits éclairés du XVIII^e

siècle : *Publius Terentius Afer* que le nom de Térence a immortalisé. Poète comique africain d'origine carthaginoise – voire berbère⁵ –, élevé à Rome mais imprégné de culture grecque, Térence est considéré comme l'un des dramaturges majeurs de l'Antiquité romaine. Si la plupart des chercheurs s'accordent sur son identité carthaginoise, certains s'interrogent encore sur ses origines. Les historiens s'accordent toutefois à situer sa naissance en Afrique du Nord, à proximité de Carthage, cité puissante et rivale de Rome. Quelles que soient les incertitudes entourant ses origines – que le nom même d'Afer (« Africain ») semble pourtant suggérer –, ce qui retient avant tout notre attention est la portée profondément humaine et universelle de l'œuvre de Térence, aussi bien dans sa trajectoire personnelle que dans sa production dramatique. Son théâtre incarne un esprit d'ouverture, de multiculturalisme et de tolérance, que son célèbre vers, *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*⁶ (« Je suis un homme, et rien de ce qui est humain ne m'est étranger »), résume à souhait. Aux dires de Michel Delon, ce vers fut même érigé en devise des lumières « considérées en tant que philosophie morale et militante »⁷.

Grâce à une beauté doublée d'intelligence, Térence a pu subjugué l'élite de l'époque et s'introduire dans le cercle intime de Scipion l'Africain et Caius Laelius. Si sa date de naissance demeure incertaine, celle de sa mort, en revanche, on la situe après celle de Plaute, lors d'un retour de voyage en Grèce entrepris après la troisième représentation de *L'Hécyre* en 160.

Ce dramaturge fit paraître six pièces comiques d'inspiration grecque en seulement six ans (entre 166 et 160 av. J.-C.) avec des succès divers⁸. C'est sa première comédie intitulée *Andria* (« L'Andrienne ») ou « La jeune fille d'Andros » parue avec succès en 166 av. J.-C., qui fit de lui l'auteur favori du cercle des aristocrates et des lettrés. Elle est suivie la même année par la comédie *Eunuchus*, « L'Eunuque », jouée deux fois de suite ; puis l'année suivante, par *Hecyra* (L'Hécyre ou « La Belle Mère »). En 163, parut *Heautontimoroumenos* (« Le bourreau de soi-même »), en 161, *Phormio*, Phormion, et enfin, en 160, *Adelphi*, « Les adelphe » ou « Les frères »⁹.

⁵ H. Banhakeia, *Térence et l'héritage amazigh* (2^{ème} partie), « Tawiza », n°88, août 2004.

⁶ Térence, *Heautontimoroumenos* (« Le bourreau de soi-même »), vers 77.

⁷ M. Delon, « Homo sum... ». Un vers de Térence comme devise des Lumières, In : « *Dix-huitième Siècle* », n°16, 1984, D'Alembert.

⁸ Terence, *Comédies*, Tome I : *Andria*, *Hecyra*, *Heautontimoroumenos*. Texte établi et traduit par Jules Marouzeau. Collection des Universités de France (CUF), Les Belles Lettres Paris 1955.

⁹ Deux frères ayant des idées opposées sur l'éducation des enfants.

⁴ D. Graeber, *Les Pirates des Lumières Ou La Véritable Histoire de Libéralisme*, traduit de l'anglais par Philippe Mortimer, Libertalia, Montreuil 2019, p. 172.

2. DIDEROT LECTEUR DE TÉRENCE

Poète comique hors pair, respectueux de son talent et très recherché par l'élite romaine, Térence a pu, malgré la cabale formée contre lui, subjuguier son public. Sa marque de fabrique réside en effet dans l'art, chez lui, de faire coexister différents modèles dans ses comédies, ajouté au jeu des oppositions et des caractères riches de ses personnages. Ces derniers, adoucis et humanisés, sont des portraits dotés de qualités morales et intellectuelles universelles, indépendantes de toutes circonstances politiques ou sociales. Lecteur assidu, traducteur¹⁰ et fervent admirateur de ce poète comique préfigurant le « genre sérieux », Diderot ne tarit pas d'éloge à son égard¹¹ et nous livre un beau témoignage à son propos :

Mais rien n'est plus rare – dit-il – qu'un homme doué d'un tact si exquis, d'une imagination si réglée, d'une organisation si sensible et si délicate, d'un jugement si fin et si juste, appréciateur si sévère des caractères, des pensées et des expressions ; qu'il ait reçu la leçon du goût et des siècles dans toute sa pureté, et qu'il ne s'en écarte jamais : tel me semble Térence. Je le compare à quelques-unes de ces précieuses statues qui nous restent des Grecs, une *Vénus de Médicis*, un *Antinoüs*. Elles ont peu de passions, peu de caractère, presque point de mouvement ; mais on y remarque tant de pureté, tant d'élégance et de vérité, qu'on n'est jamais las de les considérer. Ce sont des beautés si déliées, si cachées, si secrètes, qu'on ne les saisit toutes qu'avec le temps ; c'est moins la chose que l'impression et le sentiment, qu'on en remporte ; il faut y revenir, et l'on y revient sans cesse. [...] Heureux le mortel qui sait réunir dans ses productions ces deux grandes qualités, la verve et le goût !¹²

Dans son *Discours* de 1758, Diderot définit le « genre honnête » et « sérieux » par rapport au théâtre de Térence qu'il défend contre ceux qui lui reprochent d'être sans chaleur, sans couleur et sans force. Les traits distinctifs de ce genre sont, à son avis un sujet « important », des caractères « divers et aussi originaux », dessinés « fortement », des passions « énergiques », un style « plus nerveux, plus grave, plus élevé, plus violent, plus susceptible de ce que nous appelons le sentiment, qualité

sans laquelle aucun style ne parle au cœur »¹³. Le modèle auquel il se réfère est évidemment Terence : « J'en appelle aux beaux endroits de Terence ; et je demande dans quel genre sont écrites ses scènes de pères et d'amants »¹⁴. C'est en effet le réalisme dans la représentation des scènes intimes et naturelles comme la naissance d'un enfant ou les douleurs de l'accouchement, que Diderot admire chez Térence. Pour lui, le théâtre de Térence est un théâtre qui permet de fustiger les préjugés de son époque en favorisant une dramaturgie fondée davantage sur l'émotion et sur l'impression laissée sur le public plutôt que sur les ornements littéraires. Pour lui, même un « théâtre vide » peut exciter l'imagination et renforcer « l'effet de vérité »¹⁵, déclare-il :

J'ai lu et relu ce poète avec attention ; jamais de scène superflues, ni rien de superflu dans les scènes. [...] Térence ne s'embarrasse guère de lier ses scènes. Il laisse le théâtre vide jusqu'à trois fois de suite ; et cela ne me déplaît pas, surtout dans les derniers actes. Ces personnages qui se succèdent, et qui ne jettent qu'un mot en passant, me font imaginer un grand trouble¹⁶.

Au reste, ajoute-t-il, en défendant son goût pour la simplicité à l'antique, « la nature m'a donné le goût de la simplicité ; et je tâche de le perfectionner par la lecture des Anciens. Voilà mon secret »¹⁷.

L'identification revendiquée par l'auteur aux choix esthétiques et éthiques de Térence témoigne de cette continuité d'une conception du théâtre fondée sur la simplicité, l'émotion sincère et la fidélité à la nature humaine, tout en assumant une filiation directe avec la tradition dramatique antique favorable à la liberté de création et à la reconnaissance du génie quelle que soit sa provenance. Le théâtre de Térence a connu, dès le XVI^e siècle, un succès remarquable auprès des humanistes en quête d'inspiration¹⁸. Au XVII^e siècle, des auteurs comme Boileau, La Bruyère et surtout Molière se sont largement inspirés de ses comédies. A l'époque antique, Varron parle de *mediocritas*¹⁹ pour désigner l'ensemble de ses qualités dont la mesure, la proportion

¹⁰ « C'est une tâche bien hardie, dit-il, que la traduction de Térence : tout ce que la langue latine a de délicatesse est dans ce poète. C'est Cicéron, c'est Quintilien, qui le disent », *Réflexions sur Térence*, 1762, dans *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, t. V, texte établi par J. Assézat et M. Tourneux, Garnier Frères, Paris 1875, p. 235.

¹¹ H. Dieckmann, *Diderot, Sur Terence. Le texte du manuscrit autographe*, dans A.G. Hatcher et K.L. Selig éd., in *Studia philologica et literaria in honorem L. Spitzer*, Francke Verlag, Bern 1958, pp. 149-175 : 156.

¹² Diderot, *Éloge de Térence*, dans *Œuvres esthétiques*, éd de P. Vernière, Garnier Frères, Paris 1965, p. 63 ; note 1, e 64.

¹³ Diderot, *Discours de la poésie dramatique*, in *Œuvres esthétiques*, chap. II, « De la comédie sérieuse ». Éd. P. Vernière, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1968, p. 194.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Chap. X, « Du plan de la tragédie et du plan de la comédie ». Voir *Sur Térence*, « peintre véridique de l'humanité », Daniel Heinsius, Amsterdam, 1618.

¹⁶ Diderot, *Discours de la poésie dramatique*, op. cit., chap. XVII, « Du ton », p. 257.

¹⁷ « Du plan de la tragédie et de la comédie », op. cit., pp. 224-225.

¹⁸ E. Bury, « Comédie et science des mœurs : le modèle de Térence aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles », In : *Littératures classiques*, n°27, printemps 1996, p. 125.

¹⁹ Aucun rapport avec le sens moderne.

exacte et l'harmonie. La comédie de Térence se distingue de celle de ses prédécesseurs et de ses contemporains par son refus des excès, adoptant une esthétique de la mesure et de l'équilibre. C'est précisément cette doctrine de la « médiocrité » – entendue au sens noble du juste milieu – que Diderot reprend à son compte lorsqu'il élabore sa théorie du « genre sérieux ».

3. TOLÉRANCE VERSUS HUMANITAS

Ce qui confère à Térence son originalité, c'est avant tout le message de tolérance que ses comédies suggèrent. Si le terme même de « tolérance » n'existait pas dans l'Antiquité, la notion d'*humanitas* en incarne sans doute l'équivalent le plus proche, désignant le respect de l'autre dans ses dimensions physique, morale, religieuse et culturelle. Pour Cicéron, l'*humanitas* constitue ce qui distingue l'homme de l'animal ; elle repose sur l'usage du langage et de la raison (*oratio* et *ratio*), et implique une forme de générosité (*liberalitas*) envers autrui. S'agissant de Térence, cette idée trouve, en effet, son expression dans sa célèbre maxime, citée davantage que son auteur : *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*²⁰ (« Je suis un homme, et rien de ce qui est humain ne m'est étranger »).

Dans cette perspective, le théâtre de Térence s'inscrit pleinement dans la tradition humaniste romaine qui, de Cicéron à Sénèque, posait déjà les bases d'une morale universelle fondée sur la reconnaissance de l'humanité partagée, indépendamment du statut social ou de l'origine. C'est précisément cette vision qui interpelle Diderot chez Térence et qu'il mobilise pour repenser, à l'époque des Lumières, l'altérité. En mettant en exergue l'humanité des figures marginalisées, Térence lui inspire une critique des rapports de domination. Voltaire, de son côté, ne s'y trompe pas : admiratif lui aussi de la force morale du théâtre de cet auteur africain, écrit à son sujet : « il parla le premier avec une pureté toujours élégante »²¹. Toutefois, et au-delà de cette élégance stylistique unanimement reconnue à ce poète comique, c'est avant tout le message de tolérance qui retient l'attention de l'auteur du *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763), ainsi que l'image inédite de l'esclave que ses comédies projettent. Généreux, lucides, tolérants et dévoués, les personnages de Térence surprennent par leur profondeur morale. Loin des stéréotypes attendus, ce sont ces figures secondaires ou marginales qui font écho aux idéaux humanistes des Lumières et en incarnent les principes essentiels.

Le modèle républicain que réalisent peut-être Rome ou Athènes, note à juste titre M. Brunet, est mis au service d'une pensée où l'art – et les artistes – ont une responsabilité majeure, celle d'une transformation en profondeur de l'esprit et des valeurs de la nation, au profit de l'idéal moral et politique des Lumières²².

En effet, ce qui intéresse aussi bien Diderot que Voltaire dans l'exemple de Térence, un étranger de génie, ce n'est pas tant sa conception du théâtre comique que la portée profonde de sa réflexion sur les relations humaines. Érigé en devise par l'élite du siècle des Lumières, son célèbre *homo sum* devient un véritable manifeste contre l'obscurantisme et les préjugés de toutes sortes. « De même que l'image fondatrice de la/ des lumière(s) est animée de tensions entre vérité fixe et mouvement de recherche, [...] la philosophie des Lumières peut s'inscrire sous la devise [...] de Térence qui rappelle son sens de la solidarité sociale »²³. Dans son article « Homo sum... Un vers de Térence comme devise des Lumières », M. Delon souligne la place qu'occupe ce vers dans la définition de « l'optimisme des Lumières » et dans l'appréciation des « liens entre éthique et esthétique ». C'est, ajoute-t-il, « dans l'amour-propre que les Lumières voient le garant du dynamisme social et même de l'altruisme. Si charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même, égoïsme bien ordonné finit par autrui »²⁴.

Toutefois, si ce vers de Térence appelle à la solidarité sociale et à l'humanité commune, il dit également la détresse de ce poète comique. En effet, son statut d'étranger et d'esclave affranchi n'a jamais pu être totalement oublié par ses contemporains. Car, il incarne cette perception, à l'époque, de l'étranger vu comme un ennemi potentiel. D'ailleurs, la xénophobie des Romains favorisée par leur supériorité militaire a laissé d'eux une image d'eux très négative. La célèbre satire III de Juvénal, où l'auteur compare « le flux des Orientaux dans la Capitale » à un « égout qui se déversait dans le Tibre », en est un manifeste. Les étrangers de génie tels Térence ou Cicéron, par exemple, ne sont jamais systématiquement intégrés. L'origine italienne de Cicéron a longtemps servi de prétexte à ses ennemis politiques pour le tourner en ridicule en le traitant d'« immigré » (*unquiti-nus urbis Romae*).

En réalité, les exemples de Cicéron et Térence parmi tant d'autres illustrent également la complexité de l'identité romaine, capable d'absorber et de valoriser des talents issus de ses marges, tout en maintenant une tension constante entre centre et périphérie. Toutefois, l'at-

²⁰ Térence, *Heautontimoroumenos* (« Le bourreau de soi-même »), vers 77.

²¹ Voltaire, *Traité sur la Tolérance* (1763).

²² M. Brunet, « Le modèle antique dans le projet de réforme théâtrale de Diderot », RDE, n°59, 2024, p. 275.

²³ Michel Delon, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

titude de Rome envers les cultures étrangères, contrairement à l'époque moderne, se caractérisait par une grande capacité d'assimilation, sans racisme ni imposition linguistique ou religieuse. Admirateurs des Grecs, eux-mêmes pratiquaient le bilinguisme et respectaient la diversité culturelle.

En matière religieuse, le polythéisme romain se distinguait par sa remarquable souplesse : il ne reposait sur aucun dogme rigide et tolérait, voire intégrait volontiers, les cultes étrangers – leurs dieux, leurs rites et même leurs superstitions – tant que ceux-ci ne remettaient pas en cause l'ordre public²⁵. Cette ouverture religieuse allait de pair avec une politique d'intégration fondée sur le mérite. Contrairement aux cités grecques comme Athènes ou Sparte, soucieuses de préserver la pureté du sang de leurs citoyens fondateurs, et qui s'enfermèrent dans une exclusivité stérile menant à leur déclin, Rome fit le choix stratégique d'élargir ses élites. Comme le souligne l'historien Dion Cassius²⁶, l'empereur Claude défendit en 48 ap. J.-C., devant le Sénat, l'admission de notables gaulois, rappelant que Rome avait toujours su intégrer les hommes de valeur, quelle que soit leur origine. Cette aptitude à absorber les talents, qu'ils viennent des provinces, des peuples vaincus ou des marges sociales, reflète le génie politique de Rome : substituer à l'exclusion le principe d'intégration civique et culturelle.

De surcroît, à Rome, le statut d'esclave ne portait pas une connotation exclusivement négative. En témoigne la présence des figures illustres, telles celles de Térence, Cécilius, Phèdre ou Épicète²⁷. Ces derniers ont pu accéder à la *civitas* grâce à leur talent. Le souffle d'humanisme qui caractérise le théâtre de Térence reflète sa double appartenance carthaginoise et romaine. Ses personnages penchent naturellement vers la tolérance et la correction des mœurs. Le vil Leno, par exemple, si cher à Plaute, écrit Gualtiero Calboli, est banni de son théâtre « ainsi que la cupide et impassible courtisane, l'esclave gourmand et débauché, les pères imbéciles et lascifs, qui tolèrent les vices de leurs enfants pourvu qu'ils satisfassent les leurs et même jusqu'aux jeunes gens sans pudeur et sans esprit, raillés et insultés par les esclaves malins et méprisants²⁸. Peints avec beaucoup de délicatesse, ses personnages sont un plaidoyer pour les valeurs fondamentales de l'*humanitas*. Ce n'est sans doute pas un hasard, si un homme comme Voltaire, auteur du *Traité*

sur la Tolérance (1763), se sentant sans doute proche de lui, lui témoigne toute son estime :

Ce sont, dit-il, les grands Poètes qui ont déterminé le génie des langues. [...] Les Grecs n'écrivirent l'histoire que quatre cents ans après Homère. La langue grecque reçut, de ce grand peintre de la nature, la supériorité qu'elle prit chez tous les peuples de l'Asie et de l'Europe : c'est Térence qui, chez les Romains, parla le premier avec une pureté toujours élégante²⁹.

À travers la mise en lumière du rôle fondateur des grands poètes dans la formation et l'élévation des langues, le dramaturge souligne également le pouvoir du poète, véritable « peintre de la nature », dans la structuration de la langue – et, par conséquent, de la culture – en l'ancrant dans une forme idéale appelée à devenir une référence.

4. LA TOLÉRANCE, UNE AFFAIRE D'ÉDUCATION !

Chez Térence – Carthaginois d'origine, élevé à Rome et profondément marqué par la culture grecque – la tolérance va de pair avec l'éducation. Celle-ci joue un rôle essentiel dans la transmission aux jeunes générations des valeurs de civisme et d'*humanitas*. Dans son œuvre, Térence esquisse, par touches dispersées, des éléments de réponse à ces enjeux, à un moment où l'éducation romaine, jusque-là rigoureuse, commence à s'assouplir sous l'influence de la culture grecque. Ses comédies allient un rythme dramatique soutenu à des portraits nuancés et vivants pour soulever des questions d'ordre moral : la place de la famille dans *L'Hécyre*, les dilemmes de la conscience chez Ménédème dans *L'Héautontimorouménos*, ou encore le rôle de l'éducation dans *Les Adelphes*.

Dans *Les Adelphes*, la question centrale posée est la suivante : l'éducation doit-elle être permissive ou autoritaire ? Un débat qui fait écho aux interrogations au XVIII^e siècle. Micion, partisan d'une éducation ouverte et bienveillante, incarne le *mos Graecorum*, c'est-à-dire l'influence des valeurs grecques, plus souples et modernes. À l'inverse, Déméas défend une éducation rigide fondée sur la discipline et l'autorité, selon le *mos maiorum*, la tradition des anciens Romains. Consacrée presque entièrement à ce conflit éducatif, la comédie prend par moments les allures d'une pièce à thèse, anticipant certains traits de la satire morale et même du drame moderne. Ce qui donne à la pièce un intérêt particulier – notamment pour un lecteur ou spectateur

²⁵ Voir à ce propos : M. Fergus, *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1981 ; Sherwin-White, A.N., *The Roman Citizenship*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1973.

²⁶ *Histoire romaine*, livre 60.

²⁷ Diderot, *Réflexion sur Térence*, op. cit.

²⁸ G. Calboli, *L'Essai Sur Térence de Diderot et la Vie de Térence chez Donat*, dans *Diderot et l'Antiquité classique*, sous la direction d'A. Lehmann, Classiques Garnier, Paris 2012, pp. 261-270 : 270.

²⁹ Voltaire, *Discours de M. de Voltaire à sa réception à l'Académie Française*, dans *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, t. 23, *Mélanges*, II, Garnier Frères, Paris 1879, pp. 208-209.

moderne –, c'est la mise en scène de deux conceptions de la morale en action. Le traitement comique n'amoin-drit en rien la profondeur du sujet; il en souligne au contraire la complexité, notamment dans un dénouement où les positions des deux protagonistes s'inversent: l'un glissant vers une indulgence excessive, l'autre se ravisant précisément au moment où il triomphe.

À l'époque des Lumières, sa pièce *Les Adelphe*s a suscité l'intérêt des philosophes des Lumières en quête d'inspiration en matière d'éducation. Parmi toutes les comédies de Térence, c'est celle qui a été la plus étudiée dans les écoles. C'est notamment le personnage de Chrémès, dans l'*Héautontimorouménos*, tenant un discours pédagogique à son voisin Ménédème qui interpelle les esprits éclairés du siècle:

Je crois qu'il est dans ta nature d'être un père doux pour tes enfants, et qu'il eût été fils respectueux, pour qui l'eût traité justement et convenablement. Seulement ni toi ni lui ne vous connaissiez suffisamment. Comment cela se fait-il? C'est quand on ne vit pas selon la vérité: toi, tu ne lui as jamais montré quel cas tu faisais de lui, et lui n'a pas osé te confier ce qui se doit à un père. Si telle eût été votre conduite, jamais ces choses ne te seraient arrivées³⁰.

C'est justement cette touche d'attendrissement, rare dans les œuvres de l'époque, qui fait l'originalité des pièces de Térence où l'amour filial et l'amitié fraternelle occupent une place de choix.

CONCLUSION

En conclusion, l'œuvre de Térence, profondément imprégnée de réflexion sur l'éducation, la tolérance et les valeurs humaines, s'inscrit avec une pertinence remarquable dans l'héritage des Lumières. Par sa capacité à aborder des questions morales et sociales sous le prisme du comique, le dramaturge carthaginois a su construire un corpus dramatique d'une étonnante modernité, qui influencera durablement les écrivains des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Diderot, en particulier, reconnaît en lui un modèle d'élégance, de mesure et de profondeur éthique. Il en témoigne avec enthousiasme: «Jeunes poètes, feuillotez alternativement Molière et Térence. Apprenez de l'un à dessiner, et de l'autre à peindre», avant d'ajouter:

³⁰ «*Ingenio te esse in liberos leni puto, et illum obsequentem, si quis recte aut commode tractaret. Verum nec tu illum satis noveras, nec te ille, hoc qui fit, ubi non vere vivitur. Tu illum numquam ostendisti quanti penderes, nec tibi ille credere ausus quae est aequom patri. Quod si esset factum, haec numquam evenissent tibi*», l'*Héautontimorouménos*, (I, 1).

Quel est l'homme de lettres qui n'ait pas lu plus d'une fois son Térence, et qui ne le sache presque par cœur? Qui est-ce qui n'a pas été frappé de la vérité de ses caractères et de l'élégance de sa diction? En quelque lieu du monde qu'on porte ses ouvrages, s'il y a des enfants libertins et des pères courroucés, les enfants reconnaîtront dans le poète leurs sottises, et les pères leurs réprimandes. [...] Térence est le premier pour les mœurs³¹.

Ainsi, à travers la figure de ce poète comique, se dessine une vision éducative fondée sur l'humanitas, une vertu que Térence place au cœur de la formation morale du citoyen. Ce faisant, il anticipe les idéaux éclairés qui nourriront les grands projets réformateurs du XVIII^e siècle, notamment dans le domaine de l'éducation et des mœurs. Son théâtre, subtil mélange de comédie et de pensée éthique, jette un pont entre Antiquité et modernité, et participe activement à la construction de la culture intellectuelle occidentale.

Mettre aujourd'hui en lumière la contribution de cet auteur d'origine étrangère permet aussi de poser un regard critique sur les Lumières occidentales et sur leur rapport aux sources venues d'ailleurs. Il s'agit dès lors de (re)penser les relations entre Orient et Occident dans un esprit de reconnaissance mutuelle, en valorisant un savoir humain universel, affranchi des frontières géographiques, religieuses, idéologiques, raciales, sociopolitiques ou de genre. Une telle perspective ouvre la voie à un dialogue apaisé des identités, seul rempart durable contre les enfermements culturels et les identités meurtrières.

³¹ *Réflexions sur Térence* (1762).



Rousseau : *Otium* et Paresse

PIERRE SAINT-AMAND

Yale University, USA

Citation: Saint-Amand, P. (2025). Rousseau : *Otium* et Paresse. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 93-100. doi: 10.36253/ds-15461

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract. This article develops how Rousseau, moving away from the classical Roman notion of *otium* (with its privileges and ostentation), proposes an alternative way of conceiving and cultivating leisure. In the second *Discourse*, Rousseau starts with recalling an anthropological narrative of the natural man as being fundamentally idle. But it is in the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* that he achieves his radical personal project of leisure as laziness, in the forms of *far niente*, reverie and, later, botany. These solitary (in)activities, well established, can then be opened to a shared experience of friendship, a small circle of lovers of plants.

Keywords: Rousseau, Leisure, Idleness, Reverie, Botany.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau utilise alternativement et indistinctement oisiveté, paresse, et loisir, pour évoquer ses nombreux choix possibles de l'inactivité. La contagion sémantique entre ces termes (il y en a d'autres que je ne nomme pas encore) peut prêter à confusion. Mon intention est de faire le point sur ces notions émergentes dans le corpus de Rousseau, notions qu'on retrouve d'abord dans les textes anthropologiques jusqu'à leur achèvement terminal dans les textes autobiographiques, particulièrement *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. Rousseau en effet fait osciller ces termes entre une appartenance à l'espèce, une condition ontologique, et puis une revendication singulière, personnelle.

Ces termes renvoient tous à l'*otium* romain. Mais je voudrais montrer que Rousseau les détache de la conception ancienne de loisir. En fait, s'y ajoutent un ensemble de valeurs dont on peut dire qu'elles ouvrent plutôt à une attitude radicale. Quels sont les contours de cette radicalité? Je voudrais montrer la démarche originale de Rousseau, comment le philosophe s'affranchit de l'*otium* classique¹. On verra que c'est sur la base d'un affaïssement de cette notion, devant la menace plus présente du temps industriel, que Rousseau cherche une offre alternative, une sortie libératrice de l'empire du travail comme assujettissement de la personne. Il propose même une forme extrême, extravagante, de l'*otium* à la hauteur de son époque, les Lumières, et de ce qu'il voit déjà comme son avenir dysphorique. Ce faisant, il écrit peut-être la dernière page d'une réappropriation futuriste de l'*otium*, du

¹ Pour une histoire sémantique et culturelle de l'*otium*, voir le texte de J.M. André, *Recherches sur l'otium romain*, « Annales de l'Université de Besançon », 52, 1962.

loisir, dans ses termes, avant les illusions et les détournements de l'époque moderne et sa promesse d'un « âge du "temps libre" »².

Dans un livre qui m'est ici précieux, intitulé *Otium*, Jean-Miguel Pire rappelle les grandes lignes de la désignation de ce mot, son origine :

Ce mot désigne un temps affranchi des tâches vitales, des calculs, des préjugés, des croyances religieuses, et des intérêts. [...] en dépit de la notoriété de sa désignation latine, le loisir studieux ne naît pas à Rome, mais en Grèce avec la *skholè*. Celle-ci permet aux Grecs de créer la philosophie puis, aux Athéniens, la démocratie. L'une et l'autre sont les fruits de cette faculté inédite reconnue aux individus de réfléchir à loisir sur toutes choses en vue de se construire et de contribuer au bien commun³.

C'est pourtant cette téléologie qui manque à l'oisiveté rousseauiste. Une chose que fait Rousseau est de ne pas envisager l'oisiveté comme un moment de vie existentiel et culturel d'exception, celui d'une classe qui échapperait à la nécessité et à l'intérêt. Jean-Miguel Pire précisait : « Réduit à la sphère privée, le loisir studieux est bientôt considéré comme une simple jouissance personnelle, le luxe de quelques privilégiés, voué à leur seul profit »⁴. Dès l'abord de la question, Rousseau cherche à éviter cette oisiveté glorieuse, ostentatoire, celle recouverte d'apparat, avec son train de dignité. Rien de tout cela dans l'oisiveté repensée par lui, dont il nous donne une formule paradoxale dans *Les Confessions* : *faire plus, ne faire nulle chose*⁵. Aucune *dignitas* pour l'oisif de Rousseau, au contraire une *voluptas* enfantine, une trépidation sans objet et sans satisfaction mondaine (Rousseau mêle déjà l'oisiveté et la promenade) :

L'oisiveté que j'aime n'est pas celle d'un fainéant qui reste là les bras croisés dans une inaction totale et ne pense pas plus qu'il n'agit. C'est à la fois celle d'un enfant qui est sans cesse en mouvement pour ne rien faire, et celle d'un radoteur qui bat la campagne tandis que ses bras sont en repos. J'aime à m'occuper à faire des riens, à commencer cent choses et n'en achever aucune, à aller et venir comme la tête me chante, à changer à chaque instant de projet, à suivre une mouche dans toutes ses allures, à vouloir déraciner un rocher pour voir ce qui est dessous, à entre-

prendre avec ardeur un travail de dix ans, et à l'abandonner sans regret au bout de dix ans, à muser enfin toute la journée sans ordre et sans suite, et à ne suivre en toute chose que le caprice du moment⁶.

Mais avant d'en faire un choix singulier, Rousseau commence par ancrer l'oisiveté dans une expérience anthropologique fondatrice, coïncidant avec le début de l'humanité. Contrairement à l'*otium* qui représente une sortie des affaires publiques, du *negotium*, l'oisiveté rousseauiste s'installe dans des valeurs originelles, inspirées par la nature. C'est avant tout l'affaire des premiers hommes. Dans le *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), et sans refaire toute l'histoire négative de l'espèce humaine, Rousseau évoque ce « fort grand loisir » des commencements⁷. C'est tout l'environnement qui concourt à cette oisiveté. Il lui attribue une condition fragile, puisqu'elle ne résiste pas longtemps à l'avènement des industries et des formes de mutualité diverses qui naissent de la concurrence des intérêts. L'indolence perdue des hommes s'accompagne en fait d'une révolution géologique. On voit toute la terre sortir de son repos originel, sollicitée par les demandes des hommes. Elle est bientôt défigurée : les forêts deviennent des campagnes et des terres agricoles, puis des *propriétés*. On voit la terre se transformer en une série de suppléments industriels, par outils interposés. La terre entre essentiellement en production, devient en effet produit et propriété, terre *travaillée*. Il faut envisager la première terre comme une « terre abandonnée à sa fertilité naturelle », on peut ajouter « couverte de forêts immenses »⁸. Elle est proprement oisive, non mutilée par la technique naissante. Dans des pages où il commente la notion d'oisiveté chez Rousseau, Roland Barthes offrait ce commentaire, à l'aune de la réflexion heideggerienne. Barthes évoquait l'oisiveté radicale, « ontologique », de la nature. Celle-ci obéirait au « cercle assigné du possible »⁹. Pour Heidegger, voici comment l'intervention technologique, artificielle vient troubler la terre : « La volonté, seule, s'installant dans la technique, secoue la terre et l'engage dans les grandes fatigues, dans l'usure et dans les variations de l'artificiel. Elle force la terre à sortir du cercle de son possible [...] »¹⁰. Ces paroles s'appliquent admirablement à Rousseau, à ce moment irréparable du second *Discours*, cette première mécanisation de la nature, en fait la catastrophe (la révolution)

² Là-dessus, voir les récriminations de B. Siegler dans *Mécréance et discrédit*, Galilée, Paris 2004. Ici, p. 143, mais on lira tout le chapitre III, *L'otium du peuple*, pp. 133-172.

³ J.M. Pire, *Otium*, Actes Sud, Arles 2020, p. 22.

⁴ Idem, p. 66.

⁵ In J.J. Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, in *Œuvres complètes*, dir. par B. Gagnebin et M. Raymond t. I, Paris 1959, p. 640. J'adapte cette formule de la description de l'île utopique de Papimanie que Rousseau donne dans *Les Confessions* (Livre XII), « Où l'on fait plus, où l'on fait nulle chose ». L'orthographe est modifiée.

⁶ Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, cit., p. 641.

⁷ J.-J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité* (1755), éd. par J. Starobinski, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. III, Paris 1964, p. 168.

⁸ Idem, p. 135, mes italiques.

⁹ R. Barthes, *La Préparation du roman*, Seuil, Paris, 2015, p. 373.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

de l'alliance du fer et du blé qui amène ce que Rousseau appelle « la culture en grand »¹¹.

L'*Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781, publication posthume) confirmera à sa façon le récit anthropologique rousseauiste. L'oisiveté des premiers hommes se retrouve à l'âge pastoral (peu après celui des chasseurs). C'est l'âge paisible par excellence, celui de l'autonomie des hommes, et d'un équilibre parfait avec l'environnement : « L'art pastoral, père du repos et des passions oiseuses, est celui qui se suffit le plus à lui-même. Il fournit à l'homme, presque sans peine, la vie et le vêtement ; il lui fournit même sa demeure »¹². Et voici comment Rousseau évoque ces bergers des commencements :

Supposez un printemps perpétuel sur la terre ; supposez partout de l'eau, du bétail, des pâturages ; supposez les hommes sortant des mains de la nature, une fois dispersés parmi tout cela : je n'imagine pas comment ils auraient jamais renoncé à leur liberté primitive, et quitté la vie isolée et pastorale, si convenable à leur indolence naturelle, pour s'imposer sans nécessité l'esclavage, les travaux, les misères inséparables de l'état social¹³.

Comme dans le second *Discours*, la sortie fatale de cette période s'opère par l'agriculture. C'est par elle qu'arrive le déclin et la misère, et c'est elle qui conclut l'âge heureux des indolents. Commence alors l'âge de la folie active, de la suractivité toxique et délétère. Rousseau avait pris le soin, évoquant ce contexte, d'ajouter une note qui clarifiait cette genèse particulière de l'espèce, et il distinguait ainsi l'homme originel, celui de la nature, dont il donne le portrait :

Il est inconcevable à quel point l'homme est naturellement paresseux. On dirait qu'il ne vit que pour dormir, végéter, rester immobile ; [...] Rien ne maintient tant les sauvages dans l'amour de leur état que cette délicieuse indolence. Les passions qui rendent l'homme inquiet, prévoyant, actif, ne naissent que dans la société. Ne rien faire est la première et la plus forte passion de l'homme après celle de se conserver¹⁴.

Rousseau reviendra dans le second *Discours* sur deux figures qui personnifient son histoire spéculative :

¹¹ Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, cit., p. 173.

¹² J.-J. Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781), éd. par J. Starobinski, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. V, Paris 1995, p. 400. La première fixation des hommes, il faut le noter, se fait avec le jardin, avant la catastrophe agricole, loin des bêtes. La culture de la terre se contente du végétal, une poursuite bienveillante du minimum (l'investissement horticole est avant tout local, développe un *oikos* de la tempérance) : « Quand les hommes commencèrent à se fixer ils défrichaient quelque peu de terre autour de leur cabane, c'était un jardin plutôt qu'un champ » (p. 398).

¹³ *Essai sur l'origine*, cit., pp. 400-401.

¹⁴ Idem, p. 401.

l'oisif et l'actif. Elles résument la trajectoire qui mène de l'état naturel à l'état de société. Il finira par leur trouver deux incarnations historiques, dans le Sauvage et le Citoyen, le Caraïbe et le Ministre. Ces figures représentent deux régimes bio-politiques différents (dans des contextes géographiques différents) : l'un qui fait coïncider la vie avec son auto-accomplissement, l'autre dont la vie ne se déroule que pour aller vers son épuisement et son altération ultime dans la mort et le travail, dans la trépidante suractivité. Le Ministre, figure hyperbolique de l'homme civil, représente l'*occupatus* des traités sur l'*otium*, personnage-type des « affaires »¹⁵ :

[L'homme Sauvage] ne respire que le repos et la liberté, il ne veut que vivre et rester oisif, et l'ataraxie même du Stoïcien n'approche pas de sa profonde indifférence pour tout autre objet. Au contraire, le Citoyen toujours actif, sue, s'agite, se tourmente sans cesse pour chercher des occupations encore plus laborieuses : il travaille jusqu'à la mort, il y court même pour se mettre en état de vivre, ou renonce à la vie pour acquérir l'immortalité [...]. Quel spectacle pour un Caraïbe que les travaux pénibles et enviés d'un Ministre Européen ! Combien de morts cruelles ne préférerait pas cet indolent sauvage à l'horreur d'une pareille vie [...]¹⁶.

« MES DERNIERS LOISIRS »

Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire jouent sur la variété métaphorique offerte par le terme d'oisiveté. Mais Rousseau cette fois applique le terme à sa condition singulière. Le texte est en fait un laboratoire pour ce concept, auquel Rousseau va joindre une série de notions voisines. Il parcourt l'échelle des équivalents sémantiques (il proposera le *far niente* nouveau, un italianisme recherché auquel il accorde une résonance toute philosophique). *Les Rêveries* commencent par l'annonce de cette retraite fameuse, un éloignement éclatant du monde. Disons tout de suite que, contrairement à l'*otium* classique, il ne s'agit pas ici d'une revendication de dignité et de citoyenneté élective. Rousseau parle tout de suite de *proscription*. Il s'agit d'un exil forcé en d'autres termes, qu'il va retourner en choix de solitude, en reconduisant et réinterprétant les éléments traditionnels de l'oisiveté. On connaît les premières lignes du texte : « Me voici donc seul sur la terre, n'ayant plus de frère, de prochain, d'ami, de société que moi-même. Le plus sociable et le plus aimant des humains en a été pros crit par un accord unanime »¹⁷. Toute occupation externe est alors

¹⁵ Voir André, *Recherches*, cit., pp. 38-39.

¹⁶ Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, cit., p. 192-193.

¹⁷ J.J. Rousseau, *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, éd. par M. Raymond, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. I, cit. Les renvois à cette édition sont faits

abandonnée pour l'auto-occupation. C'est le langage des affaires que Rousseau, dans ce contexte, va détourner à son profit : « Je consacre mes derniers jours, prononce-t-il, à m'étudier moi-même et à préparer d'avance le compte que je ne tarderai pas à rendre de moi » (p. 999). Le solitaire avance l'idée d'un nouveau « compte », celui-ci strictement personnel et privé. De même, la conversation sociale est redirigée vers sa seule personne, dans une espèce de cercle vertueux, qui produit ce commandement, cette injonction personnelle : « Livrons-nous tout entier à la douceur de converser avec mon âme [...] » (p. 999). On peut observer un étrange passage du « nous » au « je » dans la phrase de Rousseau. Rousseau suit jusqu'ici la lettre de l'*otium* : l'abandon des *negotia* pour la contemplation intérieure. Plus tard, il va joindre à la méditation une activité physique, la promenade. Les deux vont se conditionner l'une l'autre pour donner ce que Rousseau va appeler proprement ces *rêveries*.

Si Rousseau esquisse ici un vague projet autobiographique, ou plutôt sa continuation, c'est d'une façon qui le dépouille d'une intention ordonnée et méthodique. Il prend tout de suite le soin d'enlever la dimension confessionnelle, inutile selon lui, dès lors qu'est abandonnée toute justification morale, toute défense organisée. Ainsi Rousseau ne joue pas par hasard sur la métaphore atmosphérique qu'il place dès l'entrée du texte, un modèle intéressant de la recherche et de l'investigation introspective : « J'appliquerai le baromètre à mon âme, et ces opérations bien dirigées et longtemps répétées me pourraient fournir des résultats aussi sûrs que les leurs. Mais je n'étends pas jusque-là mon entreprise. Je me contenterai de tenir le registre des opérations sans chercher à les réduire en système » (pp. 1000-1001). Étrange discours de la méthode que cette première promenade dont les prolégomènes sont parfaitement ironiques ! Le mot « registre » est d'ailleurs un autre terme que Rousseau détourne de son usage bureaucratique (le registre est le « livre de comptes »), pour l'appliquer à la sphère personnelle, existentielle¹⁸.

Rousseau mentionne Montaigne dans ce contexte, pour s'en prendre à l'égoïsme de l'auteur des *Essais*. Pourtant, il y a un moindre différend sur le projet d'oisiveté avec son fameux prédécesseur, c'est un même espace arraché au lieu du négoce¹⁹. Relisons les mots

de Montaigne, alors que celui-ci contemple le soir de sa vie : « Dernièrement, que je me retiray chez moy, délibéré autant que je pourray, ne me mesler d'autre chose, que de passer en repos et à part ce peu qui me reste de vie, il me sembloit ne pouvoir faire plus grande faveur à mon esprit, que de le laisser en pleine oysiveté, s'entretenir soy-mesmes, et s'arrester et rasseoir en soy ». (« De l'oisiveté », I, 8)²⁰. Montaigne poursuit ailleurs : « Il faut se réserver une arriere boutique toute nostre, toute franche, en laquelle nous établissons nostre vraye liberté et principale retraicte et solitude » (« De la solitude », I, 39)²¹. Rousseau, on l'a vu plus tôt, invalidait pareillement le lieu des affaires, celui du « compte » pour bien asseoir la dimension contemplative de son projet de retraite. Mais, contrairement au projet classique, la contemplation rousseauiste est vide de tout objet, de toute récupération intellectuelle et cognitive. C'est bien ce qui caractérise la rêverie. Erik Leborgne avait remarqué les termes qui se déployaient dans « l'entourage » du mot rêverie. Il repérait dans les différentes promenades, les suivants : « amusement (VII), méditation (I), contemplation, chimère, égarements, imagination (VII) »²². (On retrouve d'ailleurs ces mêmes termes chez Montaigne.) La rêverie rousseauiste, il faut le dire, n'aspire à aucune finalité intellectuelle ; elle est seulement le bonheur de l'esprit inoccupé. La rêverie participe d'un véritable *désœuvrement* non pas seulement du corps mais de l'esprit. Il s'agit si l'on veut d'une non-pensée méditante. Rousseau cherche à mettre au repos l'organe suprême de l'intellection. La paresse de Rousseau fait en effet la promotion d'une paresse de tête. Car il lui faut l'arrêt de l'activité intellectuelle, la cessation de toute fatigue de l'esprit²³. Par ailleurs, Rousseau marque à la date du premier *Discours* la sortie originale du monde de la liberté et l'entrée dans la célébrité épuisante. Un accablement subit s'abat sur lui dont il fait ainsi le récit dans la Septième Promenade : « jeté dans la carrière littéraire par des impulsions étrangères, je sentis la fatigue du travail d'esprit [...] » (p. 1062). La contemplation doit donc se réaliser lorsque la tête est mise au repos.

Dans *Les Confessions*, brossant son autoportrait, Rousseau évoque sa lenteur à penser : « Il faut que j'at-

désormais dans le texte. Ici, p. 995.

¹⁸ Voir la définition de l'*Encyclopédie* : « Registre, (*Comm.*) 1 grand livre de papier blanc, ordinairement couvert de parchemin, & à dos ou quaré ou long, qui sert à enregistrer des actes, délibérations, arrêts, sentences, déclarations ; & parmi les marchands, négociants, banquiers, manufacturiers, &c. à écrire les affaires de leur négoce » (Vol XIV).

¹⁹ Sur le « livre de comptes » chez Montaigne et sur l'usage du mot « registre », voir Ph. Desan, « Pour clore nostre conte » : la comptabilité de Montaigne, « Littérature », 82, 1991, pp. 28-42.

²⁰ M. de Montaigne, *Essais* in *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris 1962, p. 34.

²¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, cit., p. 235.

²² E. Leborgne, éd., *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, GF Flammarion, Paris 1997, p. 18.

²³ J.-L. Chrétien montre comment Malebranche ouvre une tradition qui associe la pensée et la fatigue : « Rompant avec la pensée grecque, Malebranche fait de la pensée un travail : "L'homme doit travailler de l'esprit pour gagner la vie de l'esprit, c'est une nécessité absolue" ». Voir *De la fatigue*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1996, p. 50. Rousseau rejoindrait alors une forme proche de la philosophie grecque qui allie de façon catégorique loisir, *skholè*, et pensée.

tende», une sorte de jachère imposée²⁴. Les *Dialogues* évoquent également la distraction du personnage que Rousseau nomme «Jean-Jacques», un état qui est sa «paresse de penser»²⁵. Cette distraction est particulière chez Rousseau : le sujet précisément «ne pense à rien»²⁶. Dans la même œuvre, et l'attribuant au même «Jean-Jacques», Rousseau explique le paradoxe de l'oisiveté que j'évoquais auparavant : «Il ne peut souffrir une oisiveté absolue : il faut que ses mains, que ses pieds, que ses doigts agissent, que son corps soit en exercice et que sa tête reste en repos. Voilà d'où vient sa passion pour la promenade ; il y est en mouvement sans être obligé de penser. Dans la rêverie, précise-t-il, on n'est point actif»²⁷. Une citation des *Rêveries* développe le lien entre rêverie et contemplation, lien consubstantiel. En fait, elle réunit toute la famille sémantique de l'oisiveté : «La rêverie me délasse et m'amuse, la réflexion me fatigue et m'attriste ; penser fut toujours pour moi une occupation pénible et sans charme. Quelque fois mes rêveries finissent par la méditation, mais plus souvent mes méditations finissent par la rêverie, et durant ces égarements mon âme erre et plane dans l'univers sur les ailes de l'imagination, dans des extases qui passent toute autre jouissance» (p. 1062).

Plus tard, la rêverie se métamorphose en un moment de recouvrement affectif. Dans la Deuxième Promenade, Rousseau voit faiblir la rêverie d'origine, il sent la perte de sa force, de son «délire» même. C'est l'âge qui semble affecter la contemplation intérieure. Désormais, c'est l'écriture qui va faire entrer la rêverie dans le cercle vertueux de la réminiscence affective. Rousseau évoque ces «délires internes» que l'écriture relance. Par l'écriture ou grâce à elle, la rêverie se dote d'un supplément extatique : «En voulant me rappeler tant de douces rêveries, au lieu de les décrire, j'y retombais. C'est un état que son souvenir ramène, et qu'on cesserait bientôt de connaître en cessant tout à fait de le sentir» (p. 1003).

En effet, la rêverie va bien s'estomper à la fin et laisser sa place à une nouvelle composante de l'oisiveté : il s'agit de la botanique. C'est dans la Septième Promenade que s'effectue le transfert vers cette autre inactivité qui vient conclure «le temps de rêver» (p. 1060), et finit par se substituer à lui. Cette inactivité, on va le voir, garde avec la rêverie la même exigence de liberté, la même absence de «contrainte» (p. 1060). On avait vu que la rêverie consistait en une sorte d'évidement du sujet, de

rabrouement de la pensée²⁸. Le moment de son abandon va se révéler dans les *Rêveries* celui aussi de son épuisement. Voici la fin annoncée de la rêverie et le constat dramatique de Rousseau : «[...] je m'enivre moins du délire de la rêverie ; il y a plus de réminiscence que de création dans ce qu'elle produit désormais, [...] l'esprit de vie s'éteint en moi par degrés» (p. 1002).

En quoi va consister alors le temps d'herboriser qui assure la relève de l'oisiveté ? De quoi est-il fait ? La botanique apparaît dans les *Rêveries* à un moment terminal de la vie de Jean-Jacques, comme un avatar de l'*otium* pastoral et champêtre, l'*otium* vagabond des origines²⁹. Il s'agit d'un amusement de la fin, coïncidant ironiquement à une série d'incapacités du personnage, à des handicaps et des abandons. Rousseau nous dit être «déjà vieux» (p. 1060), quand il revient à la botanique, «sexagénaire», précisément (*ibidem*). Il aborde cette occupation à travers les manques, les restes de lui-même. En effet, la botanique doit se frayer un chemin à travers le «peu de mémoire» et son manque de «forces» (p. 1061). Rousseau proclame cette acceptation en règle philosophique : «la sagesse même veut qu'en ce qui reste à ma portée je fasse tout ce qui me flatte [...] sans autre règle que ma fantaisie et sans autre mesure que le peu de force qui m'est resté» (p. 1060). La Septième Promenade qui met en scène le renouveau d'intérêt pour cette étude accumule en effet les manques qui atteignent le projet de Rousseau. À l'orée de son entreprise, il se retrouve, écrit-il, «sans guide, sans livres, sans jardin, sans herbier» (p. 1061). Plus loin, il insiste, évoquant encore sa vieillesse : «sans facilité, sans mémoire» (p. 1061). Rousseau s'attache désormais à des objets de l'expérience immédiate. S'il y avait sans doute dans la rêverie le risque du ressassement du malheur, du retour de la douleur, la botanique, quant à elle, ne s'appuie pas sur l'imagination rancunière, n'est plus tournée vers le passé. Elle recherche seulement la satisfaction du présent : «Mon imagination qui se refuse aux objets de peine laissait mes sens se livrer aux impressions légères mais douces des objets environnants» (p. 1063).

Cette recherche des objets de la sensibilité fait de la botanique une occupation hors d'atteinte de l'instrumentalisation pharmaceutique mercantile ou intellectuelle, surtout du consumérisme du profit, addictif aux drogues et remèdes (Rousseau mentionne les lavements, les tisanes, les médicaments)³⁰. La botanique doit

²⁴ J.J. Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. I, cit., p. 114.

²⁵ J.J. Rousseau, *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques : Dialogues*, éd. par R. Osmond, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. I, cit., p. 809.

²⁶ Idem, p. 809.

²⁷ Rousseau, *Dialogues*, p. 845.

²⁸ Sur cette mise en passivité de la pensée, voir la lecture des *Rêveries* par A. Charrak dans *Rousseau : De l'empirisme à l'expérience*, Vrin, Paris 2013, pp. 191-193.

²⁹ J.-M. André dans son livre *L'Otium dans la vie morale et intellectuelle romaine* convoque «[l'] association de l'*otium* et du verbe *ambulare*, originelle peut-être et conforme à l'étymologie», PUF, Paris 1966, p. 30.

³⁰ *Les Rêveries*, Septième Promenade, cit. p. 127.

rester, pour Rousseau, une « étude inutile », (p. 1064), « une contemplation pure et désintéressée » (p. 1065). Elle se restreint alors à la seule observation, sans autre intention. Aucune profondeur dans la botanique, qu'un enchantement de la surface. La nature n'est qu'une perception : elle se donne uniquement à voir³¹. Rousseau multiplie les qualifications de l'apparence, de l'immanence lumineuse, les signifiants de la visibilité : « Arrêtez-vous, écrit le solitaire, dans une prairie émaillée à examiner successivement les fleurs dont elle brille [...] » (p. 1064). Il montre encore « l'émail des prés, l'éclat des fleurs » (p. 1064) ; « La nature, précise-t-il, n'a pas fait la dépense inutile d'orner et varier l'aspect des plantes parce que ce qui est caché comme par ce qui paraît »³². Au-delà de la justification esthétique, c'est donc la qualification phénoménologique de la nature qui doit guider le botaniste : « Il n'admet pour vrai que ce qu'elle lui montre »³³. Le promeneur explique admirablement ce transfert de la cognition à la sensation, il accepte un sensualisme original et strictement restreint : « Mes idées ne sont presque plus que des sensations, et la sphère de mon entendement ne passe pas les objets dont je suis immédiatement entouré » (p. 1066). Ce qui mène Rousseau à cet éloge lyrique du règne végétal, qui reprend de nouveau la surimpression de l'apparence :

Brillantes fleurs, émail des prés [...] venez purifier mon imagination [...] Attiré par les riants objets qui m'entourent, je les considère, je les contemple, je les compare, j'apprends enfin à les classer, et me voilà tout d'un coup aussi botaniste qu'à besoin de l'être celui qui ne veut étudier la nature que pour trouver sans cesse de nouvelles raisons de l'aimer. (p. 1068)³⁴.

³¹ Sur cet attachement du naturaliste à la visibilité de la représentation classique, voir M. Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Gallimard, Paris 1966, pp. 140-158. Ajoutons dans ce contexte de priorité du visible que Rousseau, quand il considère la fabrication des herbiers dans la fameuse lettre VIII des *Lettres sur la botanique*, permet pour la conservation des spécimens, qu'on néglige les racines. Elles ne s'élèvent pas à la distinction et à la singularité de la plante. Seule la « figure » doit prendre la préséance, destinée qu'elle est au prestige de l'apparence : « La nature, qui a tant fait pour l'élégance et l'ornement dans la figure et la couleur des plantes en ce qui frappe les yeux, a destiné leurs racines aux fonctions utiles, puisqu'étant cachées dans la terre leur donner une structure eut été cacher la lumière sous le boisseau », in Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, t. IV, cit. p. 1192.

³² J.-J. Rousseau, *Fragments de botanique*, éd. par R. de Villemorin, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. IV, cit., Paris 1969, p. 1256.

³³ *Fragments de botanique*, cit., p. 1250.

³⁴ Il est intéressant de voir que Rousseau utilise un terme de la pratique artisanale, l'émail, d'une technique pour évoquer la visibilité de la nature. Elle semble ne pouvoir être évoquée que la métaphore de la technique (orfèvrerie, peinture). L'art de l'émail consiste à ajouter de la couleur ou à imiter le brillant des pierres. Dans tous les cas, il s'agit d'un supplément de visibilité. Voir l'article « Émail » de Diderot dans l'*Encyclopédie*, vol. V (1755).

En fait, je dois nuancer ce que je disais auparavant : il ne s'agit pas seulement de voir mais d'*aimer* ce que l'on voit : l'expérience sensible vient déborder le champ de la connaissance et la botanique devient précisément « aimable »³⁵.

ÉLOGE DU VÉGÉTAL

Rousseau avait pris le soin (en fait le malin plaisir), pour dégager la simplicité de la botanique, celle du règne végétal, d'offrir des exemples contradictoires tirés des autres règnes. Ceux-ci proposent, contrairement au végétal, de « hideux objets » (p. 1068) qui éloignent le promeneur solitaire. Le règne minéral qui enferme son observateur sous terre est peut-être l'exemple le plus négatif. On est loin de la surface agréable mais dans l'inversion abyssale et ténébreuse de la nature, dans un sous-sol terrifiant. On est retiré de la visibilité de la terre : là, rien à contempler. Le règne minéral convient mieux, Rousseau nous le dit, aux « cyclopes » (p. 1067). Pour forcer l'argument, le philosophe rationalise (par l'argument économique) et mythologise les travaux dans les mines³⁶. Il s'agit littéralement d'un *enterrement* : on vient y faire le deuil de la nature. En voici le paysage calamiteux : carrières, gouffres, et mines, auxquels il faut ajouter les lieux et les instruments de travail correspondants : « des forges, des fourneaux, un appareil d'enclumes, de marteaux, de fumée et de feu » (p. 1067). Dans le second *Discours* (que je citais auparavant), il évoquait déjà « cette quantité de métiers malsains qui abrègent les jours ou détruisent le tempérament ; tels que sont les travaux des mines, les diverses préparations des métaux, des minéraux [...] »³⁷. C'est donc la nature qui est poussée au comble de son artificialisation, de sa transformation technologique. Tous ces métiers abjects de l'industrie fossile sont ceux de la destruction et de la combustion malade ; ils portent

³⁵ Rousseau, *Fragments de botanique*, cit., p. 1250.

³⁶ Voir l'article « Mines » de d'Holbach dans l'*Encyclopédie* : « Mines, (*Hist. nat. Minéral. arts.*) on nomme ainsi les endroits profonds de la terre, d'où l'on tire les métaux, les demi-métaux, et les autres substances minérales qui servent aux usages de la vie, telles que le charbon de terre, le sel gemme, l'alun, etc. La nature, non contente des merveilles qu'elle opère à la surface de la terre et au-dessus de nos têtes, a encore voulu nous amasser des trésors sous nos pieds. Le prix que les hommes ont attaché aux métaux, joint aux besoins qu'ils en ont, leur ont fait imaginer toutes sortes de moyens pour se les procurer. En vain la Providence avait-elle caché des richesses dans les profondeurs de la terre ; en vain les a-t-elle enveloppées dans les rochers les plus durs et les plus inaccessibles, le désir de les posséder a su vaincre ces obstacles, et ce motif a été assez puissant pour entreprendre des travaux très-pénibles malgré l'incertitude du succès » (vol. X, 1765).

³⁷ Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, IX, cit., p. 205.

atteinte à la vie³⁸. Rousseau donne plutôt sa préférence au « ciel azuré » (p. 1067).

Même procès du règne animal. Le solitaire est incapable d'une étude qui fabrique la contrainte et met les animaux en situation d'observation artificielle (volières, ménageries). Mais c'est surtout le recours à l'anatomie qui le mène au plus extrême dégoût. C'est la mort artificielle des animaux et la spectacularisation de cette mort pour les besoins de l'étude qui détourne l'intérêt de Rousseau ; c'est l'observation des profondeurs des corps : « Il faudra donc les étudier morts, observe-t-il, les déchirer, les désosser, fouiller à loisir dans leurs entrailles palpitantes ! Quel appareil affreux qu'un amphithéâtre anatomique : des cadavres puants, de baveuses et livides chairs, du sang, des intestins dégoûtants, des squelettes affreux, des vapeurs pestilentielles ! » (p. 1068). Le même terme d'« appareil » passe d'ailleurs chez Rousseau du règne minéral au règne animal pour illustrer la même mise en spectacle artificielle de la nature, avec tout son programme de mécanisation. Par contraste aux autres règnes, la botanique déploie à l'inverse sa simplicité, la pauvreté de ses moyens, convient à la technologie minimale nécessaire au botaniste : « une pointe et une loupe sont tout l'appareil dont il a besoin [...] » (p. 1069). La botanique reste une étude du faible, un art d'accommoder les manques. Ainsi, le promeneur va « d'herbe en herbe », de « plante en plante » (p. 1068). Il parcourt une topographie de l'aléatoire et de l'accident. Il est le naturaliste de la proximité et du disponible, de l'immanence gratuite. Car : « [l]es plantes [...] naissent sous nos pieds, et dans nos mains pour ainsi dire [...] » (p. 1069). Et la promenade du botaniste, sa démarche, trouve sa justification naturelle : « Il se promène, il erre librement d'un objet à l'autre, il fait la revue de chaque fleur avec intérêt et curiosité » (p. 1069).

On voit comment Rousseau, dans une parfaite orthodoxie du naturaliste de l'âge classique, répugne à l'invisible, au caché des organes. Ce qui est présenté comme un argument selon un ordre esthétique et de la sensibilité est aussi valide si l'on considère cette fois l'ordre épistémologique. Michel Foucault explique que c'est cette présence du visible qui justifie la place exemplaire de la botanique, de la connaissance des plantes dans l'histoire naturelle de l'époque : « on ne pouvait, proclame-t-il, savoir et dire que dans un espace taxinomique de visibilité »³⁹.

Un dernier détail à propos de l'*otium* et de la botanique. On voit Rousseau garder ce loisir personnel éloigné des centres académiques et scientifiques qui en font

des bureaux de compétition et de la promotion égoïste. Il recherchera plutôt des compagnons de promenade et d'autres amoureux de cette pratique qu'il associe à un *otium* de l'itinérance, un *otium* partagé. C'est à une communauté amicale que Rousseau participe donc, à un commerce que le loisir réciproque encourage. Rousseau s'érige comme le modèle de cette « oiseuse occupation » (p. 1069) et il dénonce, en sonnant l'alarme, les botanistes de cabinet. Il évoque alors « les haines, les jalousies que la concurrence de célébrité excite chez les botanistes-auteurs autant et plus que chez les autres savants. En dénaturant cette aimable étude, poursuit Rousseau, ils la transplantent au milieu des villes et des académies [...] » (p. 1070). Loin de la haine et de la dispute, c'est *a contrario* une même passion qui réunit ces amis botanistes et les rassemble dans une sociabilité champêtre choisie. Faisant exception à la promenade solitaire, Rousseau mentionne quelques-uns de ces *happy few* dans les *Rêveries*. Il nomme particulièrement Du Peyrou, d'Escherny, et le colonel de Pury (p. 1072). Cette communauté phytophile est à l'opposé de la société des méchants sur laquelle s'ouvriraient si dramatiquement les *Rêveries*.

MORALE DE L'OISIVETÉ

Dans *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, Rousseau nous donne à contempler une élaboration ascétique du moi qui échappe au modèle de la contrainte. En cela, il rejoint entièrement l'esprit de l'*otium*. La revendication lassante de liberté dans le texte est ce qu'il faut entendre dans son projet de retraite, tel que Rousseau l'envisage dans ses derniers jours : « je ne pouvais souffrir l'assujettissement, j'étais parfaitement libre, et mieux que libre, car assujéti par mes seuls attachements, je ne faisais que ce que je voulais faire » (p. 1099). Pour cela, il veut se soustraire à toute obligation. Le sujet renonce à toute activité ; il prend le contre-pied du faire et s'impose un commandement, s'abstenir (c'est une des exigences suprêmes de l'*otium*) : « Je m'abstiens d'agir : car toute ma faiblesse est pour l'action, toute ma force est négative [...] » (p. 1059). Il l'annonçait déjà dans la première promenade, acceptant sa nouvelle solitude : « m'abstenir est devenu mon unique devoir » (p. 1000). Rousseau opère une réconciliation paradoxale du non-agir et de la volonté qu'il offre comme la base d'une nouvelle conduite, une éthique de la liberté : « [...] je n'ai plus d'autres règles de conduite que de suivre en tout mon penchant sans contrainte », insiste-t-il (p. 1060). Plus précisément, le scandale de la liberté rousseauiste (c'est bien ainsi qu'il perçoit la radicalité de son attitude) est à entendre selon

³⁸ Sur les débuts de ce capitalisme fossile, voir M.A. Meziane, *Des empires sous la terre*, La Découverte, Paris 2021, pp. 195-208.

³⁹ Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, cit., pp. 149-150.

une double restriction négative décidée par le sujet: «*ne jamais faire ce qu'il ne veut pas*» (p. 1059, mes italiques).

Rousseau fait alors de la paresse le moteur même d'un non-vouloir, d'une rétraction devant l'impératif de volonté⁴⁰. Il pousse très loin cette abstention, cette «désactivation»⁴¹, pour parler comme Giorgio Agamben; elle est d'abord dirigée par rapport à soi, comme l'expliquent les *Dialogues*: «Rebelle à toute autre volonté il ne sait pas même obéir à la sienne, ou plutôt il trouve si fatigant même de vouloir»⁴². Cette paresse de vouloir s'élargit pour regrouper l'ensemble des autres négations de l'activité chez Rousseau. Il faut l'aligner avec des formes accessoires comme la «paresse de penser»⁴³ et la «paresse à parler»⁴⁴. Elle finit par surprendre le sujet dans une paresse généralisée de l'être, une retraite qui n'a de cesse que d'attendre la fin prochaine.

⁴⁰ On peut constater ici l'épuisement de la volonté générale. En effet, l'«accord unanime» sur lequel s'ouvrait les *Rêveries* et qui devait réduire Jean-Jacques à l'isolement se résout en un non-vouloir, à l'opposé de l'idéal de la volonté générale, cette convention dont Rousseau voyait ainsi les effets sur l'État: «Alors tous les ressorts de l'État sont vigoureux et simples, ses maximes sont claires et lumineuses [...]», J.-J. Rousseau, *Contrat social* in *Œuvres complètes*, t. III, cit., p. 437.

⁴¹ G. Agamben parle d'une forme d'impuissance qu'il caractérise ainsi: «[elle] a constitutivement la forme d'une puissance-de-ne-pas, [...] en tant qu'elle ne peut qu'à partir d'un pouvoir de ne pas [...]», in *L'Ouvert. De l'homme et de l'animal*, Payot, Paris 2002, p. 103.

⁴² Rousseau, *Dialogues*, cit., p. 846.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 809.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 803.



Citation: Watanabe, H., Oki, S. & Tamada, A. (2025). The Making of Antiquity: Japanese Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Special Issue: 101-104. doi: 10.36253/ds-15460

©2025 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

The Making of Antiquity: Japanese Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

HIROSHI WATANABE¹, SAYAKA OKI¹, ATSUKO TAMADA²

¹ The University of Tokyo, Japan

² Chubu University, Japan

Abstract. In 18th century Japan, a nationalistic perception of antiquity evolved in direct opposition to the ideal of Confucian antiquity. While Confucianism, which idealized Chinese antiquity as a golden age of virtuous rule, appealed to the warrior class with its emphasis on universal principles and reason, a counter-movement emerged in the form of *kokugaku* (national learning). The movement reinterpreted ancient texts such as the *Kojiki* and *The Tale of Genji* as expressions of a distinctly Japanese mentality and culture, elevating the feminine aristocratic court culture of the *Heian* period (from the late 8th to the 12th centuries) as an ideal. Its leading figure, MOTOORI Norinaga, drew a sharp distinction between the *karagokoro*, the Chinese way of thinking, and the 'Upright Heart' of ancient Japanese people, which he saw as rooted in poetic sensibility and an emotional, aesthetic understanding of the world. The concept of antiquity formulated by the *kokugaku* played a crucial role in shaping Japanese identity and state ideology, particularly during the Meiji Revolution (1868-), when efforts to restore imperial rule and establish a centralised government ultimately dismantled the ancient regime associated with the warrior caste.

Keywords: Japanese antiquity, *Kokugaku* (national learning school), MOTOORI Norinaga, *Heian era*, Confucianism in Japan.

In present-day Japan, the perception of classical antiquities is characterised by a pluralistic nature, incorporating the influence of ancient China and

* This paper faithfully reproduces the talk by Hiroshi Watanabe, Sayaka Oki, and Atsuko Tamada, titled *The Making of Antiquity: Japanese Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. This talk was prepared for the Panel on Global Antiquities of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, held on Monday, 3rd July, at Sapienza University of Rome. The content of the talk was primarily prepared by Watanabe, with Oki and Tamada assisting in the initial planning of the structure. The oral presentation was delivered by Oki. We have chosen to publish the talk in its original form because it provides a succinct summary of Watanabe's research achievements accumulated over decades. We believe this approach is preferable, as it directs readers to his comprehensive works rather than presenting another extended summary. The following are the main works on which this paper is based: H. Watanabe, *A History of Japanese Political Thought, 1600-1901* (日本政治思想史), Engl. transl. by D. Noble, International House of Japan, Tokyo 2012; Id., *Confucianism and After: Political Thoughts in Early Modern East Asia* (東アジアの王権と思想 増補新装版) [in Japanese], Revised Edit., University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo 2016; Id., *Meiji Revolution, Gender and Civilization* (明治革命・性・文明) [in Japanese], University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo 2021.

Japan. In the 18th century, there was a notable effort to differentiate between Chinese and Japanese antiquities. In this talk, we explore how classical antiquities were conceptualised during that period.

Let me provide a brief overview of 18th-century Japan. This era was characterised by a prolonged period of peace that lasted for more than two centuries under the *Shogun*, who was the leader of the Tokugawa clan belonging to the hereditary warrior class. From 1639 to 1863, virtually no armed conflicts occurred within the country or beyond its borders. The Tokugawa clan effectively governed Japan through a decentralised political system, relying on its military supremacy and the support of approximately three hundred local lords. The clan's ruling did not adhere to any specific political or religious ideologies. Although the Imperial Court existed in Kyoto, the ancient capital city, it had limited symbolic authority¹.

In contrast to Qing China (1644-1912) and Choson Korea (1392-1910), it was only during the 18th century that Confucianism gradually gained acceptance among the ruling warrior class in Japan. This was partly because Confucianism was originally intended for the sovereign and bureaucratic officers, rather than the warrior class in the Chinese imperial system. As a result, in the 17th century the Japanese warrior class dismissed Confucian teachings, viewing them as a culture of cowardly intellectuals.

However, the need to maintain dominance during a prolonged period of peace brought about a shift in perspective among the warriors. They developed an interest in moral education to provide additional justification for their political authority, which until then had been based solely on military power. As a result, local lords increasingly established schools to teach Confucianism to their vassals, recognising its value in fostering moral principles and supporting their leadership.

Confucianism presented the Japanese people with an idealised image of Chinese antiquity as the golden age. This ancient era was believed to have been governed by renowned virtuous emperors, the Sons of Heaven, whom Confucius (552/551-479 BC) admired. According to Confucius, peace and order prevailed at that time because of the honest and beautiful manners practised by both courtiers and the common people. This perception on antiquity served as a model to be emulated by the ruling class, who felt a moral obligation to strive towards re-establishing this ideal state in contemporary society.

It is important to note that this Confucian image of antiquity in Japan was gendered and associated with masculinity, primarily because of the genders of its key figures and intended audience. Confucianist teachings prescribed their norms with the assumption that men were the rightful rulers and condemned the involvement of women in politics as immoral. This perspective did not contradict the values and culture of the Japanese warrior class, as its male members naturally regarded themselves as epitomes of virility within the population.

The acceptance of Confucianism in Japan was not a passive process; it entailed a vigorous reinterpretation of Confucian classics to adapt the teachings to Japanese society. This was necessary because the canon contained elements closely tied to Chinese social systems and customs. While acknowledging the authority of the canon, new interpretations emerged to better understand the model of antiquity in China, with the assumption that the orthodox interpretation was 'incorrect'. These Japanese attempts at interpretation further facilitated the spread of Confucianism throughout Japanese society, extending beyond the confines of the ruling class.

In addition to Chinese antiquity, another distinct and revered period in Japanese history was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Japanese people. This period is known as the *Heian* era, which spanned from the late 8th to the 12th centuries and marked the flourishing of the Imperial Court in Kyoto. This alternative ideal, the *Heian era*, continued to captivate individuals, particularly women, even after the 17th century when the political prestige of the Imperial Court waned.

Between the 9th and 12th centuries, a number of renowned literary works emerged from a small aristocratic circle. These included beautiful waka poems, many of which were romantic poems, and renowned literary works such as *The Tale of Genji*, often considered the world's oldest full-length novel, and *The Pillow Book*, an essay reflecting a keen aesthetic sensitivity. In contrast to the Confucian canon written in classical Chinese, both these works were written by female authors using *onnade*, Japanese phonetic characters widely employed by aristocratic women. These literary figures were highly educated court women, each serving one of the emperor's wives. They showcased cultural and aesthetic refinement and contributed to the prestige of their respective mistresses, who competed against each other to gain favours from their husband, the emperor, thus upholding the honour of their family of origin.

Despite the loss of political power, the Imperial Court's aristocratic culture continued to be admired. In the 18th century, the court and its city, Kyoto, were widely romanticised as symbols of feminine aesthetic refine-

¹ It is said that this situation instilled in people both utilitarianism and moralized obedience to the authority. With this mindset, people prioritized the pursuit of prosperity over transcendental values, without hesitating to marginalize any controversial or rebellious moves against the ruling class.

ment and provided ideals of women. This was because the *samurai*, the warrior class, had established their own male ideals, but had not proposed a specific ideal for women. In fact, many successive shoguns took aristocratic women from the Kyoto court as wives.

In this historical context, a group of male scholars established the 'national learning' school known as *Kokugaku*, which rapidly gained influence during the 18th century. One of its prominent figures was MOTOORI Norinaga (1730-1801), an intellectual from the merchant caste². The proponents of *Kokugaku* opposed the spread of Confucianism in Japanese society by arguing that it was not worthy of promotion and was harmful to the country because of its Chinese-centric cultural perspective.

Confucian scholars believed that the doctrines of Confucianism, expressed in classical Chinese, possessed universal validity, and should naturally be applied in Japan to civilise its 'barbarian' people who were considered culturally inferior. In contrast, the national learning school rejected the notion of situating its homeland on the periphery of Chinese civilisation and instead promoted a nationalist and nativist perspective. Their argument centred on the idea that the Japanese people should preserve their mentality (*mentalité*) and take pride in their country's unique achievements of long-lasting stability and peace. They contrasted this with the political turmoil and frequent dynastic changes experienced by their continental neighbour, China.

In rejecting the ideal of Chinese antiquity, the national learning school turned to the cultural heritage of the Japanese *Heian* period as an alternative norm. As mentioned earlier, the literature and art of the *Heian* period were characterised by being primarily transmitted among women to cultivate feminine sensitivity. This 'feminine' antiquity was reinterpreted as representative of Japanese mentality and culture, positioned in opposition to both Confucianism and its adherents among the *samurai* class.

MOTOORI Norinaga specifically argued that the stern self-discipline advocated by Confucianism and revered by the *samurai* was mere hypocrisy. He believed that the true 'human sentiment' should be 'transient, awkward, and loose' (排蘆小船, *Ashikawake obune*). He devoted himself to the study of *The Tale of Genji* and waka poetry and composed poems throughout his life.

Furthermore, his scholarly endeavours went back even further than the 'old age of *Heian*' to the legendary beginnings of the nation. Drawing on the *Kojiki*, a seminal Japanese chronicle compiled in 712 that blend-

ed mythological tales with semi-historical accounts, he concluded that ancient Japan was an ideal state where humans lived innocently with their natural emotions, which, however, made them voluntarily obedient to the emperor. He embraced the mythical narratives found in the *Kojiki*, including the origins of the imperial dynasty, which recounted the ancestry of the emperors as divine beings descended from a celestial realm under the commission of the sun goddess to rule the Japanese archipelago for eternity. Through his meticulous interpretation and detailed commentary on the *Kojiki* (a laborious work that took him 32 years to complete), he firmly asserted the existence of a distinct Japanese mentality that persisted from prehistoric times up to the *Heian* period.

Norinaga drew a distinction between the *karagokoro*, the Chinese way of thinking, and the 'Upright Heart' and 'Pure Heart' of ancient Japanese people. In his view, Confucianism principally relied on the capacity of human reason to comprehend the fundamental principles that governed the world without depending on supernatural revelations. According to this perspective, Confucian principles stem from the Great Nature (the Heaven, *ten* (ja.), *tian* (ch.)) and its moral and political doctrines are closely linked to nature and reason, bearing some resemblance to the Enlightenment philosophy of 18th-century Europe.³ In contrast, Japanese mentality is rooted in scepticism towards the ability of reason to grasp abstract universal principles, and it does not attempt to explain or understand the world through natural principles (heavenly principle, *tenri* (ja.), *tianli* (ch.)).

Norinaga believed it arrogant for humans to assume that they could fully understand a world filled with mystery and absurdity, where the good suffer and the wicked prosper. Instead, he valued the sincere modesty of the 'Upright Heart' which reverently accepted the realities of life and approached them with a sense of awe. To him, ancient Japanese literary works, such as *waka* poems and *The Tale of Genji* eloquently expressed this perspective, portraying delicate sentiments intertwined with sorrows and love. Therefore, he encouraged people to cultivate an interest in such literary works, particularly *The Tale of Genji* and to express their artistic creativity by composing poems that reflected and embodied their innate 'heart'.

In conclusion, 18th century Japan witnessed the emergence of a nationalistic perception of antiquity that stood in opposition to the ideal of Confucian antiquity.

² According to him, his ancestors belonged to warrior class but abandoned its status at the beginning of the early Edo period.

³ Cf. H. Watanabe, *A History of Japanese Political Thought 1600-1901*, *op. cit.* (chap. I. «The Political Thought of the Middle Kingdom: Confucianism»).

This process bears some resemblance to the rise of German Romanticism, which emerged as a 'reaction' to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and rationality.

MOTOORI Norinaga and his school gained substantial following in the country through his prolific publications. His theories influenced people's perceptions and led many to view the imperial court in Kyoto as the true centre of Japan's unity and to hold greater respect for the emperor than for the Shogun, who governed from Edo. A century later, the concept of antiquity presented by the national learning played a crucial role as an ideological element in the Meiji Revolution (1868-), which sought to restore imperial rule and establish a centralised government, ultimately dismantling the ancient regime associated with the warrior caste.

DICIOTTESIMO SECOLO

SISSD

Rivista della Società Italiana di Studi sul Secolo XVIII

Introduction

Marina Formica

3

Entre fidélité à l'Antiquité et quête de modernité: l'impossible scepticisme des Lumières
Sébastien Charles

7

Enlightenolatry and the Promotion of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the United States

Al Coppola

15

An Etruscan empire in the Mediterranean world. Antiquities, cultural models and national identities in 18th-century Italy
Antonino De Francesco

23

From the Koh-i-noor to the *Hitopadesha*: Consumption of Indian Antiquities in the Colonial Market

Sutapa Dutta

33

How Activist Should Enlightenment Studies Be? Examples to Consider From Three Centuries

Daniel Fulda

49

La nouvelle science et la science antique: l'échec d'un désaveu de paternité?

Chantal Grell

57

Revisiting Enlightenment Universalism: 18th-Century Lessons on Nonliteral Translations and Transcultural Storytelling

Wen Jin

71

Rune Stones and Honourable Wounds: The Gothic Idea in Two Eighteenth-Century Swedish Medals

Merit Laine

79

A l'école des Anciens: le cas de Térence le Carthaginois

Halima Ouanada

87

Rousseau: *Otium* et Paresse

Pierre Saint-Amand

93

The Making of Antiquity: Japanese Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Hiroshi Watanabe, Sayaka Oki, Atsuko Tamada 101