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WAS 'CLASSIC MODERNITY' AUGUSTINIAN?

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Abstract: *Donald Greene's debates on Augustan and Augustinian cultural identity in the late 1960s wrought a useful alley into Intellectual History, History of Ideas and Modernity Studies. Articulated as demythologization in the face of mythopoeic potency, his demonstration drew critical attention on the necessity to plum historical depth more thoroughly and come with persuasive conclusion only after minute discernment. Projected against the modernity discourse, this sheds new light on the melioristic project of West Civ., places the debate in wider contexts, and makes useful the mention of other names in support of the ideatic kernel of the matter. Amongst them are David Nokes, Frank O'Gorman, Clifford Siskin and William Warner. These are intellectual offspring of the glorious Vivian de Sola Pinto, Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg. With this conceptual baggae, the present paper attempts a view of "Classic Modernity" aka the Enlightenment as part of the "Long Modernity" project, following a track proposed in previous academic contributions (Irimia 2007, 2010, 2014) and refers the discussion to English empiricism and continental values, with the benefit of doubt, that essential modern value.*

Almost half a century ago Donald Greene and Vivian de Sola Pinto waged an apparently anodyne conceptual war in the arena of Eighteenth-Century Studies on whether the said century, more precisely its early phase, had better be called Augustan or Augustinian. Thirty years on, in the chapter on Augustanism of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, David Nokes could not but start his argument with the realization that "[i]n recent years the term 'Augustan' [had] been treated to a good deal of critical knockabout," that it made an important ideological assumption and that Donald Greene's conclusion in the mid-1960s-70s could be taken for granted: "the early eighteenth century was more Augustinian than Augustan." (93) Nokes saw its ideological arrogation in the imperial authority and literary refinement which "reinforced the notion of cultural inclusiveness" and best identified the latter in Pope's Homer, "a poetry which functioned as a living palimpsest, reinvesting the literature of the past with a new mythopoeic potency," the two classic epics under his quill becoming "echo-chambers wherein... one may hear reverberations from the whole literary culture of the West." (98-99) While this sounded like Eliot's historical sense, with tradition and the individual talent making up a timeless order and modern poets containing their predecessors in an ideal order, it also asked for the part played by religion in culture, given the historical depth grasped by the critical eye.

Since the late 1960s, indeed, there had been a tacit agreement that this religion-sensitive definition of Augustanism and its follow-up involved a matter of *demythologization*. This was way before Frank O'Gorman's "long eighteenth century"

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came to the fore, with its landmarks extending between the Glorious Revolution (1688), on through the Age of Queen Anne (1702-1714) – customarily regarded as ‘the Augustan Age’ –, on through Hanoverian or Georgian times (1714-1820, including the Regency, i.e. 1811-1820), possibly coming to an end with the Battle of Waterloo (1815), but also carrying on till the Reform Act (1832), if not downright till the Accession of Queen Victoria (1837). O’Gorman took issue with the “Age of Reason” and looked into the “Long Eighteenth Century” as a time more of tensions and conflicts than of order and balance, and certainly one with a persistent religious identity: “Indeed, during the eighteenth century, contemporaries were in no doubt that the political structures and the religious order with which they were familiar had their origins in 1688.” (132)

Such reconsiderations preceded Modernity Studies and what, in my own critical vocabulary, I call “Classic Modernity”, aka the Enlightenment, as part of “the Long Modernity.” (Irimia 2007, 2010, 2014) In all of these, the issue of religion appeared as an undeniably necessary component of an age otherwise held as rationalistic, well-ordered and aloof, in telling contrast to emotion-laden times of what we currently call Romanticism.

In 2010-2011 Clifford Siskin and William Warner held a debate on the Enlightenment and Romanticism as, the one, an event, and the other, an eventuality in the “history of mediation.” (Siskin & Warner, “This Is Enlightenment” 1). They refrained, and still do, to place the discussion within the history of ideas simply because this onetime pride of American academic elitism looks to them as part and parcel of Romanticism, so not much help for an objective evaluation. In their turn, they provided the proof of the plus/minus-religion definition of the “Long Modernity” (Irimia 2014) being still central on the critical front.

Back in 1969, de Sola Pinto reproached Greene with a number of evaluative failures: the view that many eighteenth-century writers had been frightened reactionaries or hidebound classicists, while in fact many had been sincere practising Christians subscribing to Augustinian theology; that the English Augustan Age had produced much good poetry, while it had been fundamentally a prosaic age and the foundation time of the modern novel; and that Greene had helped demolish the great Liberal-Romantic myth of the Victorian age, as he upheld the Conservative Anti-Romantic myth of the twentieth century. Underlying both myths, I will maintain, was the modernity discourse with its *melioristic* project: on the one hand the overall Romantic view enthused with the belief in innate human perfectibility, something Greene would have called Pelagianism, on the other the Conservative vision of human perfectibility only by divine grace, or what de Sola Pinto himself viewed as Augustinianism. To these two was duly added the Marxist myth, readily dismissed as irrelevant, if, as we could assert now, essentially of modern ilk with its *melioristic Weltanschauung*.

Greene replied by emphasizing that he felt unhappy to see any label attached to literary history or, indeed, periods, and that calling the eighteenth century more of an Augustinian than an Augustan Age was of the nature of confusion rather than of clarification. He made a religion (sic) of asserting that any other century could well have qualified for an Augustinian identity and applied his judgment to the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries as follows: “a Miltonist who ignored *De Doctrina Christiana* as Swift’s and Johnson’s sermons have been ignored by most Swift and Johnson scholars would now be unthinkable.” He was persuaded that the time had come for eighteenth-

century literary scholarship to start “bring[ing] itself up to the higher standards of interdisciplinary awareness which the scholarship of medieval and Renaissance literature [had] begun to set.” (300) On top of the modern discourse, two crucial issues of (Cultural) Identity and Modernity Studies, namely, period(s) - periodization and interdisciplinarity loom large in these revaluations of the critical 1960s.

If we cast a glance at the Siskin-Warner theory of the early 2010s, they appear fairly strong, alive and kicking half a century on. The intertwining of the two issues underlies our American colleagues’ basic assumption that “mediation embraces both the technological and the human”. Such agents as individual authors, editors, publishers, club members, sitters to conversation piece painters, or less attractive ones, like highway robbers good at violent attacks on carriages full of travellers or chimney sweep masters pushing their animate cleaning tools to an early and terrifying death, these human mediations “can be more easily pinned down to particular times and places than ‘ideas.’” What they share with mechanical mediations, we shall add, is a given *historico-cultural embeddedness*, a *chronotopic* identity which, if “scale[d] too far up or too far down,” assumes the status of classical physics entities. “Our narratives and anthologies record those stumbles as ‘periods.’” (Siskin & Warner, “If This Is Enlightenment” 283)

Unlike such dry entities, mediations are fleshly, we are invited to deem, engaged as they are in *linking* cultures within themselves and between their own components, as well as by extending their ties with other cultures time- and space-wise. No better proof than thinking of Romanticism as an eventuality in the track of the event called the Enlightenment, using the platform of mediation put in place by its predecessor and consolidating its onetime novelty. A *sui generis* type of societal religion (L. *religio*, *-onis* < *religo*, *-are* ‘to bind, to connect (man to the gods)’) arises in the still unfinished debate: “our first step is . . . to step back. We turn to the past to gain some perspective Whether with regret or admiration, readers to the present day have seen Kant’s motto as a signpost to modernity, turning Enlightenment into a precursor to be blamed or celebrated”. (Siskin & Warner, “This Is Enlightenment” 3) Here is a list of mediations that Siskin and Warner see as constitutive of Classic Modernity, aka Enlightenment: a new infrastructure (e.g. coffee houses, taverns, inns), new genres and formats (e.g. periodicals, novels), new associational practices (e.g. clubs, scientific and literary-artistic societies), new protocols (e.g. the postal system, copyright rules).

With our hindsight now, one and a half decades into the twenty-first century, we can still admit that “What is Enlightenment?” remains a valid question. It can be “extended across thousands of years . . . or . . . fragmented into multiple Enlightenments, each one tied to different ideas and/or different locations.” (Siskin & Warner, “If This Is Enlightenment” 283) For Horkheimer and Adorno, its dialectic was coextensive with, indeed, a very Long Modernity all the way from Odysseus to Hitler, an impressive unfolding of mechanized history and pragmatized thought, with its scientific heritage turned instrumental reason and the will-to-power over nature its underlying law. No wonder the Frankfurt School Penelope put her freshly repatriated husband to the test of their immovable marriage bed. If the Frankfurt School Odysseus stood the time-and-faithfulness test, as he did, the victory would not be so much his as it was myth’s and Enlightenment’s. He appeared as the prototypical bourgeois ready to show how his labour could save himself and his family and secure for them an enjoyable existence.

This comprehensive view of modernity was to become the substance of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate with roots in Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1934) and branches stemming from the same trunk, albeit growing in different directions. Karl Löwith saw "meaning in history" evolving in a genealogy of ideas, with modern progress as a fulfillment of the Christian eschatological pattern pulled on by the Hegelian vehicle – history carrying the spirit on, *in* this world. He could only conclude that the modern age was illegitimate, because a product of secularization. Blumenberg, instead, identified "the legitimacy of the modern age" in the self-assertion of people and their experience of technology, to the effect that for him it was people that made history, not God, nor even the providential spirit of Hegel's sweeping view. Progress, in other words, was no longer secularized Christian accomplishment (with the Augustinian *figuram implere* theory in the background), but a process at work within history, and one operating through its own internal logic. Modernity he defined as an expanse of time whose legitimacy resided in its deepest identitary layers. The Löwith-Blumenberg dyad found its common ground in the Weberian religio-economic explanation of the success story called West Civ. For the sake of the argument, it could be called Augustinian-Pelagian, its inner duality pointing to plus-religion *and* minus-religion components, the one ascertaining the Christian Weltanschauung all through history, from unconditionally accepted mysticism to overtly acquiesced secular reason - via the rationality of Classic Modernity, the other building its ideatic order on humanly instituted legitimation.

In the 1930s, when Arthur O. Lovejoy was giving his Harvard lectures in the history of ideas and preparing *The Great Chain of Being*, he provided a philosophical analysis of the principle of plenitude. To the Platonic foundation of his demonstration he

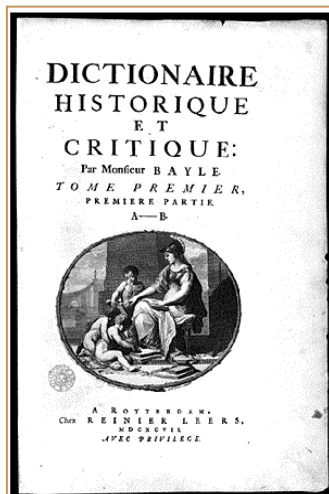


Fig. 1. Dictionnaire Historique et Critique by Pierre Bayle (1697)

added the Neo-Platonic development, aware that St. Augustine had brought its validation into Christian theology. He also saw it confirmed by thinkers upholding the conviction that the world contains all possible forms of existence, from St. Aquinas's natural philosophy to the Copernican heliocentric model and on to Giordano Bruno's theory of infinite worlds, with Spinoza identifying its logic in the logical sense and Kant in its metaphysical condition. At about the same time Paul Hazard in France studied the "critical years" of the European mind, namely 1680-1715. As a historian of ideas himself, he saw in the transition from Neo-Classic fixity to Enlightenment ideals of perfection the rule of intellectual and moral forces, rather than of material factors. In America, Carl Becker had published *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, based on lectures delivered at Yale. To him Western thought appeared as inextricably Christian, with emphasis laid on grace and salvation as in the Middle Ages, or on progress and improvement as in the nineteenth century. The one period he

treated with special interest was the eighteenth century, falsely considered the "Age of Reason," since its view of nature, natural law, sense, sensibility and perfectibility shared the fundamentals of Augustinianism. Hence his famous conclusion: "the *Philosophes* demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine only to rebuild it with more up-to-date

materials.” (31) At the apex of the European crisis signaled by Hazard, Richard Simon and Pierre Bayle had pointed to the historical character of faith and therefore its critical nature. Both the *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* and the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (Fig. 1) kept on foot the issue of religious tolerance and argued against the authoritarian application of religious articles of faith. They anticipated the eighteenth century’s historicism, a “modern concept and way of thinking” (Stromberg 19) and its understanding of history as “a chronology of meaningful events” (Kennedy 132).

De Sola Pinto’s dispute with Donald Greene came in the track of Greene’s study “Augustinianism and Empiricism: A Note on Eighteenth-Century English Intellectual History,” which admittedly tried to locate and define the “Age of Reason.” Greene had proved sceptical of Augustinianism, a term launched by Leavis, being a fair description of the period. Nor was Enlightenment embraced as really appropriate, for, while it took on board deism and encyclopedism, it contradicted the myth of non-mythical thinking. With the exception of Hume and Gibbon, actual rejecters of the Christian doctrine, of Gray and Walpole, who practised some form of scepticism, and of the deist Shaftesbury, there were thinkers of the time, not least of whom William Blake, who promoted theological



Fig. 2. William Blake, *Newton* (1795)

terminology and expounded the views of the Gospel in order to assertively oppose the scientific-rationalistic position held by Newton. Blake was categorical about it: “May God us keep/ From single vision and Newton’s sleep.” (Fig. 2)

One possible solution entailed by a better title to his study, Greene carried on, could have been “Christianity and Science in the Eighteenth Century.” Still Augustinianism seemed appropriate if used to designate not everything that St. Augustine maintained, but rather the fallen, so corrupt nature of the human race, their alienation from God and therefore the “focus on self-redemption and self-salvation” or else, the “Protestant emphasis on man’s ‘good works’ able to secure moral virtue.” (43) Augustinianism as “evangelical Christianity” and “education of the self” (50) appeared as a welcome definition. It seemed to derive from the belief that human reason reflects God’s own design in and for nature – the ‘argument from design’ –, that the inherent powers of human nature – the “new philosophy” – focus on the individual capacity to reason, and that the “new science” of the Royal Society were all beneficial to the utmost. These pointed to the tradition of English empiricism and, in tandem with this extensive understanding of Augustinianism, acted as important elements of the ethical system of the age: they proved aware of our limitations as individuals, of our fallen condition, so of our striving for oneness without accepting pride and immoderation.

Critical evaluations and revaluations from the 1970s to the present have been sensitive to this generous, since flexible, understanding of Augustinianism, in the wider context of Modernity Studies. Vico’s modernity, for instance, has been interpreted as the obvious effect of his “profound Augustinianism,” (Hutton 366), in that civilized man grows into rational maturity, thus becoming estranged from the passionate ground of existence; this, in turn, is retrievable via the poetic energy in the human race – a

metaphoric way of looking at the Augustinian creed in terms of poetic salvation – the Vicoian “new science” that history offers to modern times.

More spectacularly and un-orthodoxly, St. Augustine has been considered a Neo-Platonist, rather than a full-fledged Christian, especially if we consider his *Confessions*, his focus on the singularity and orderedness being compared with “structural(ist) Marxism”, while his ethical Manicheism and doctrine of man’s free will brought to critical attention as “Emotional Marxism.” (Matthews 11) Also, Augustine of Hippo’s teaching and exemplary learning have been seen as part of an extended historical experience of the race: his decision to synthesize Christianity with classical thought has been presented as eudaemonistic (< Gr. *ευδαιμονία* ‘happiness’) or teleological (< Gr. *τέλος* ‘end’) (Harrison 69), so partaking of the melioristic view that traverses Western civilization; the fourth century, his time, saw the cult of martyrs and relics emerging, interest in holy sites and the topography of the Holy Land, the image of Rome started being promoted as a multiple identity, at once the eternal city, the burial place of the apostles Peter and Paul, the seat of the Bishop of Rome and the ancient centre of the new Christian Empire. All these find secular equivalents in post-WWI-WWII Europe and work as unifiers of our modern cultural identity.

Augustine and Literature is a telling title in our critical readings. The book of the same title published in 2006 makes a point that the seventeenth century was, at the continental level, “the century par excellence of Saint Augustine,” (167) while the eighteenth century somehow shunned him. Yet, as Becker argued in the 1930s, “Classic Modernity” (Irimia 2014) granted an “unprecedented status to modern prose as a pedagogical tool,” (132) truth becoming a form of power in the building of a better society. The wrongly called “Age of Reason” gradually grew aware of the special relationship holding between St. Augustine, the most literary of the Church fathers, and Milton, the most theological of the English poets. In their attempts each “to justify the ways of God to man,” they promoted a theodicy aiming to make of history a meaningful coming of age of the human race, as well as to establish the right relationship of “freedom and necessity” (Bonner 2007).

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