Ancients and Moderns Reconsidered

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THERE IS A POINT OF VIEW from which the whole history of ideas can appear to be a struggle between old and new, between the ancients and the moderns. But the contest that broke out afresh and with especial acrimony in the 1690s was unusual in that it was to a large extent a deliberate resumption of a very specific set of rivalries whose outlines were first laid down in Antiquity and which had come to life again during the Italian Renaissance with the revival of classical culture. The story of the battle of the books is well known, if only from the pages of Jonathan Swift. But, like many a tale with a literary character, its reality in fact remains a little doubtful and its historical meaning more than a little obscure. Strangely enough, the battle of the books has never really been recounted in detail and it badly requires a new perspective. Above all, it needs to be set into a framework of intellectual history as an episode in the age-old dispute between the ancients and the moderns. And it needs to be told, not merely in outline from a few half-remembered classics, but in full historical detail, calling upon the manuscripts as well as the printed sources. If that is too much to attempt in a brief compass, it may at least be worth proposing here that it was an event of more significance than has usually been recognized, that it urgently requires reevaluation, and that it possessed a meaning that outlived its own immediate context and still may speak to us.

For the most part, notice of the battle has been confined hitherto either to protagonists like Swift who deliberately misconstrued it or to students of literature who have seen it merely as a gloss upon the poets. The first, in their eagerness to secure the victory, tended

both to underestimate and to misunderstand their adversaries and thus obscured the real issues and the fact that the quarrel ended in a draw. Moreover, their personal idiosyncracies and ad hominem arguments seem to have distracted their contemporaries from the real issues, as they have continued to bedevil their successors. The second, limited by the inclinations of their discipline, have not wanted to look much beyond the printed texts and their purely literary meanings and have thus failed to see the larger setting and significance of the quarrel. Nor does it appear that historians have done much better, content since Macaulay's time either to dismiss the whole affair as trivial, or with their eyes fixed firmly upon a later time, to ignore it altogether. So most recent writers would appear to agree with Ira Wade who once described it as a "tempest in a teapot."[1]

Perhaps this is why the English episode has never received a comprehensive account, although rivers of ink were spilled during the battle and it is rarely overlooked in the history of literature.[2] The nearest thing, a book and some articles by Richard Foster Jones which confined itself largely to the background, is now seriously dated, despite the claims of a recent editor that they are definitive.[3] Jones was a pioneer in his interest in the relationship between literature and science in the seventeenth century and he awoke attention to an important set of problems in the history of ideas. But he limited himself to only one aspect of the quarrel and never really did describe its climactic episodes, preferring instead to concentrate upon the preliminaries. He was, besides, partisan and limited in his researches. Nothing much seems to have been accomplished since, although some valuable work has been done on the continental *quer-*

[1]T. B. Macaulay, "Francis Atterbury," *Miscellaneous Writings*, 2 vols. (London, 1860), II, 209–26; Ira Wade, *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 627. Typically, Paul Hazard omitted the *querelle* altogether in his influential work, *The European Mind 1680–1715*, trans. J. Lewis May (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953).

[2]The one attempt to survey the whole ground, now over a hundred years old, is Hippolyte Rigault, *Histoire de la querelle des anciens et des modernes* (Paris, 1856), which, however, treats the English episode only incidentally (pp. 277–352). The best literary account of the battle is probably A. C. Guthkelch and N. D. Smith, Introd., *A Tale of a Tub*, by Jonathan Swift (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958).

[3]See the sketch of Jones by Marjorie H. Nicholson in R. F. Jones et al., *The Seventeenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1951), pp. 1–9.

elle and its antecedents. It is undoubtedly past time to review the whole subject and to reassess its significance.[4]

For Jones the battle of the books was exclusively an English affair isolated from the continental *querelle* and rooted in peculiarly English intellectual conditions like the rise of the new science and what he vaguely called "puritanism."[5] He dismissed the literary side of the affair as trivial in order to concentrate attention upon philosophy and natural science. No doubt he did real service thus in suggesting that the English episode was not merely an appendix to the French—as French scholars had always insisted—and in calling attention to the importance of Francis Bacon, the Royal Society, and seventeenth-century natural philosophy.[6] But his thesis was extreme, to say the least, and in the end thoroughly unsatisfactory. In fact, the English quarrel cannot be understood without its continental origins; nor did the English combatants ever lose contact with events across the Channel. Thus the first of the English ancients in the battle of the books, Sir William Temple, noticed himself that at least half of his inspiration was a tract by the Frenchman, Fon-

[4]See Joseph M. Levine, "Ancients, Moderns and History: The Continuity of English Historical Writing in the Later Seventeenth Century," *Studies in Change and Revolution*, ed. Paul Korshin (Menston, England: Scolar Press, 1972), pp. 43–75, and Levine, *Dr. Woodward's Shield: History, Science and Satire in Augustan England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1977). For the continental background, see Hans Baron, "The *querelle* of the Ancients and the Moderns as a Problem for Renaissance Scholarship," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20 (1959), 3–22; August Buck, "Aus der Vorgeschichte der Querelle des anciens et des modernes in Mittelalter und Renaissance," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 20 (1958), 527–41; Giacinto Margiotta, *Le Origini Italiane de la Querelle des anciens et des modernes* (Rome: Editrice Studium, 1953); Jose Antonio Maravall, *Antiguos y modernos* (Madrid: Sociedad de Estudios Publicaciones, 1966).

[5]Jones first set out his ideas in *The Background of the Battle of the Books* (Washington University Studies, 7, 1920), an abridged and amended version of which appears in *The Seventeenth Century*, pp. 10–40. He developed them further in *Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Rise of the Scientific Movement in 17th Century England* (1936; 2nd ed., St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1961). Other articles supplementing these views appears in *The Seventeenth Century* and *The Triumph of the English Language* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1953).

[6]Rigault, pp. 332, 351; Antoine Adam, *Histoire de la littérature française au xviie siècle*, 5 vols. (Paris: Domat, 1954–57), III, 125 ff. The important work of Hubert Gillot, *La querelle des anciens et des modernes en France* (Paris: R. Champion, 1914), treats only the French quarrel; there is an English summary in Arthur Tilley, *The Decline of the Age of Louis XIV* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1929).

tenelle, and he later called upon Racine and Boileau to back him up[7] while the first of the English moderns, William Wotton, found equal support abroad, first in the recent work of Charles Perrault, whole passages of which he transcribed into his own book, ultimately in the earlier Italian, Alessandro Tassoni.[8] At no stage, even in the preliminaries, were the English participants unaware of what was happening on the Continent. Thus the Elizabethans who first began to consider the problem (like Gabriel Harvey, Samuel Daniel, or Walter Raleigh), all seem to have found their bearings in the Italian Renaissance and the sixteenth-century French *querelle*, some of which had already been turned into English.[9] In the next generation, George Hakewill, one of Jones's most important moderns, provides another example of the missing background. Writing in 1627, Hakewill seems to have borrowed one of his best ideas directly from the Spanish humanist, Juan Luis Vives (as Ben Jonson was to do a little later), and then to have passed his inspiration along to a contemporary Frenchman, the Sieur de Rampalle, as well as to a later generation of Englishmen. As a matter of fact, the idea that he employed, that the moderns could be represented vis-à-vis the ancients as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, was a thought that seems to go back at least as far as the twelfth century, to the medieval humanists of the school of Chartres. Nor was it soon forgotten; it appears to have been used at least once in every generation thereafter right down until the time of the quarrel—its con-

[7]"An Essay upon Ancient and Modern Learning," *Miscellanea*, Pt. 2 (London, 1690). p. 4: "Some Thoughts upon Reviewing the Essay of Ancient and Modern Learning," *Miscellanea*, Pt. 3 (London, 1701), pp. 209–11. Another French influence may have been Temple's friend, Saint-Evremond; see Walter M. Daniels, *Saint-Evremond en Angleterre* (Versailles: L. Luce, 1907), pp. 17, 104–9. For Fontenelle, see Robert Shackleton, ed., *Fontenelle: Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), with the text of the digression on the ancients and the moderns (1688), pp. 159–76.

[8]*Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (London, 1694), *A Defense of the Reflections* (London, 1705), pp. 34–35. For Perrault and Tassoni, see note 24, below.

[9]See, for example, Louis Le Roy, *Of the Interchangeable Course or Variety of Things in the Whole World*, trans. Robert Ashley (London, 1594), and *Aristotles Politiques* (London, 1598); Henrie Stephens, *A World of Wonders: Or an Introduction Touching the Conformitie of Ancient and Modern Wonders*, trans. R. C. (London, 1607).

venient ambiguity making it equally useful to both sides.[10] Certainly the appearance of a common set of 'progressivist' ideas at almost the same time in Hakewill and Rampalle, in the Italian, Lancellotti, and the Scottish Pole who studied in England and taught at Leyden, John Johnstone, suggests the thoroughly international character of the ideas that were shortly to be revived in the battle of the books and their deep roots in the culture of the Renaissance. A recent work on Spain in the golden age has only helped to spread the net wider, although it was long known that Tassoni for one was anticipated by the sixteenth-century Spaniard, Christobal Villalon; and that when his own work was turned into French, it became one of the occasions for the later seventeenth century *querelle*.[11]

Moreover, the quarrel really was about literature and history at least as much as it was about science and philosophy, especially as it drew to a climax. Swift's own contributions, *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of the Books*, like Temple's before him, show almost no interest in anything else; and the contest about literary imitation went on merrily for more than a century after the battle, blissfully unaware that it had been concluded. Thus earlier students like Joel Spingarn were not entirely wrong when they argued for the centrality of the battle of the books in the history of literature and criticism, although they too undoubtedly saw it too narrowly.[12] Not only did they overlook Jones's emphasis on science and philosophy

[10]Dwarfs and giants may be traced in the following (besides Buck, note 4 above): Foster E. Guyer, "C'est nous qui sommes les anciens," *Modern Language Notes*, 36 (1921); "The Dwarfs on the Giant's Shoulders," ibid., 45 (1930), 398–402; George Sarton and Raymond Klibansky, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants," *Isis*, 24, 26 (1935–36), 107–9, 147–49; J. de Ghellinck, "Nani et Gigantes," *Bulletin du Cange*, 18 (1945), 25–29; Edouard Jeauneau, "Nani gigantum Humeris insidentes: Essai d'interpretation de Bernard de Chartres," *Vivarium*, 5 (1967), 79–99; Roy S. Wolper, "The Rhetoric of Gunpowder and the Idea of Progress," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 31 (1970), 594; Elizabeth Gössman, "Antiqui und Moderni in 12 Jahrhundert," *Miscellanea Medievalia*, 9 (1974), 40–57; A. G. Molland, "Medieval Ideas of Scientific Progress," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 39 (1978), 561–78. Much of the story is told in Robert Merton's entertaining book, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

[11]Maravall (note 4, above), p. 595, relying on Alfredo Giannini, "Il libro X dei *Pensieri diversi* di A. Tassoni," *Revue Hispanique*, 41 (1917). See also Abraham Keller, "Ancients and Moderns in the Early Seventeenth Century," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 11 (1950), 79–82. Hakewill's work, *An Apologie for the Power and Providence of God*, appeared first in 1627; Johnstone's *De Naturae Constantia* in 1632; Lancellotti's *L'Hoggidi* in 1637; and Rampalle's *L'Erreur Combattuë* in 1641.

[12]Joel E. Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1908–9), I, lxxxviii ff.

but they pretty much ignored the relationship of literature to life, so much more intimate in this period than in our own, the relationship, for example, of literature to politics and education.

It looks as though what led Jones astray were some unexamined assumptions that were nearly axiomatic in his own day, i.e., that the moderns had not only won but "ought to have won" the quarrel; that "utilitarianism, humanitarianism, democracy, and the like," all the best things in Jones's world, were given exclusive birth by the moderns of the seventeenth century and, although impeded somehow by a neoclassical century between, had eventually "resumed their onward march" to his own time; and finally by his unwillingness to allow either the reality or the significance of any other issues in the quarrel except for the triumphant progress of the new science.[13] In this respect he seemed eager to reduce even the changes in English style during the seventeenth century and the many disputes about language then simply to the impact of science upon literature, despite the fact that Morris Croll and others were finding a very different inspiration for them.[14] Thus he had neither time nor patience for the seventeenth-century ancients whom he found willfully obscure and "conservative" and he missed both the force and the meaning of their arguments altogether. Nor did it ever seem to bother him that it was the leaders of the nation in politics and society, as well as all the important writers, who inclined to the classics and despite generations of argument remained unconvinced about the usefulness of modernity. Like other historians of progress in his time, like Bury in England, for example, or Delvaille in France, both of whom included chapters on the quarrel in their influential books, Jones looked only to the eventual outcome and read back into the quarrel the meaning that he wished to find and the victory that he felt—but only retrospectively—must happen.[15] He offered

[13] *Ancients and Moderns*, pp. 272, 338*n*.

[14] Jones, *Triumph*, p. 323, and articles reprinted from the *Publications of the Modern Language Association* (1930) and *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (1932) in *The Seventeenth Century*, pp. 75–110, 143–60. For criticism, see Croll in *Philological Quarterly*, 10 (1931), 184–86 and Nethercot in *PMLA*, 46 (1931), 962–64, with Jones's reply, 965–67. For other views, implicitly critical, see R. S. Crane, *The Idea of the Humanities*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), I, 72–89, and W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrews to Tillotson* (London: SPCK, 1932), pp. 394–96.

[15] J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (London: Macmillan, 1920), Chs. iv-v; Jules Delvaille, *Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de progrès* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1910) Ch. v.

in brief a kind of 'Whig' intellectual history to match the more familiar political counterpart—and with all the same shortcomings.

Well, we have lost some confidence since Jones wrote, not merely in the past and future, but more especially in the progressive consequences of our modern science. And while we would probably not want to take refuge in the old notion of decay which was, for example, argued by Hakewill's opponent Bishop Goodman, or by Temple himself, nevertheless we are undoubtedly better placed now to understand just what it was that the ancients were saying.[16] It seems suddenly surprising that not only Jones alone but nearly all the other historians of the quarrel in England and outside should have paid so little attention to what was, after all, fully one-half the argument. Naturally, therefore, they misunderstood the event, for the ancients were not simply defenders of tradition against the new, they had in fact come onto the European scene in England as elsewhere as innovators, humanists, in revolt against the culture of their own (late medieval) times. Thus, paradoxically, an ancient could in certain circumstances appear to be a modern, as we shall see the moderns, more closely examined, could sometimes turn out to be ancients. In the battle of the books the ancients were the self-conscious continuators of the Renaissance and were determined like their predecessors to exalt and to imitate the past—but not any past and certainly not that medieval past which was to them all Gothic and barbarous—rather that special corner of the past which they demarked as classical antiquity and to which they attached a peculiarly practical value. It is only by beginning with the proposition that the culture of Antiquity, like the culture of the Renaissance, was a genuine and vigorous response to the world of events, an affair of practice and not simply of art—and certainly no mere aberration—that one can appreciate how it lived on for century after century to withstand the onslaught of various forms of modernity.

A history of the quarrel must begin therefore with the ancients. But here at once we encounter a difficulty, for it is apparent that the culture of Antiquity was not in fact one single homogeneous entity any more than that revival which forms the immediate backdrop to our quarrel. In fact, the ancients of 1700, like their humanist predecessors, rarely hearkened back to all the ancients of Antiquity but preferred simply to select those that they found useful and to

[16]Godfrey Goodman, *The Fall of Man* (London, 1616).

ignore the rest. In 1700, for example, as in Antiquity itself, there was a profound division between those who took philosophy as the crown of education and culture and those who preferred rhetoric, each with their allied disciplines. We have been well reminded of this division in antique culture in the monumental volumes of Jaeger and Marrou, if we did not know it already, as did the eighteenth century, directly from ancient writers like Plato, where in dialogue after dialogue, philosopher is pitted against sophist.[17] And we know that the Renaissance saw a resumption of just such a contest in the rivalry between humanist rhetoric and scholastic logic that appears from first to last in the period, from Petrarch through Valla and Politian to Erasmus. What we are in danger of forgetting is that this enmity did not cease with the sixteenth century but remained a persistent feature of the European intellectual landscape throughout the early modern period. As a consequence, there were at least two different kinds of ancients in 1700, those who (to simplify) were eager to follow Plato or Aristotle and those who preferred Cicero or Quintilian, and they did not always agree. The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns was thus preceded by a long and acrimonious contest among the ancients themselves and the attack upon Aristotle was by itself (and despite Jones) no simple indication of modernity. Indeed the backward-looking Renaissance humanists and the seventeenth-century ancients were as hostile to that ancient writer as they were to any of the 'new' philosophers. It was indeed possible to denigrate Aristotle and at the very same time, like Temple, to exalt Cicero and the classical poets. It was, of course, also possible to exalt ancient philosophy and to decry or ignore classical literature. But it seems hardly possible to understand the battle of the books without first seeing just what this long-standing antipathy among the ancients was about and how it was renewed during the early modern period.

But if there were at least two different kinds of antique culture at odds with each other in the years before 1700, there were also at least two different kinds of modern challenge. The first occurred

[17]Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet, 3 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1944); Henri Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956) and *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique (Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et Rome*, fasc. 145, 1938–49). Some of the relevant Platonic dialogues were conveniently assembled and translated by André Dacier and turned into English in 1701 as *The Works of Plato Abridg'd*.

within the camp of the rhetoricians when the authority of the classical authors was questioned, first by those who argued for a more liberal kind of Latin imitation against the pedantic claims of the 'Ciceronians,' then by those moderns who preferred the vernacular altogether. Once again, the groundwork was prepared in Antiquity where the argument over style and imitation, over the new as against the traditional eloquence, had become commonplace, particularly in late classical times. So, for example, when Tacitus in the little dialogue on oratory that is usually attributed to him, debated the virtues of Cicero as against a more 'modern' kind of Latin, the concise and pointed style of the Empire, he was rehearsing arguments which were to resound again from the Italian Renaissance to the eighteenth century. And it is no accident that Erasmus's famous dialogue, the *Ciceronianus*, where the arguments of Tacitus are repeated with many other classical borrowings, was reprinted at Oxford in 1693, on the very eve of the battle of the books. It is a familiar paradox of our quarrel that the moderns (in this case the anti-Ciceronians) should find some of their inspiration in the very classical works that they were diminishing; they generally conceded more to the ancients that they were willing to admit.

In the same way, but even more noisily, the argument over the *volgare*, i.e., whether to prefer the modern languages to the ancient tongues, developed wherever Antiquity was revived, in Italy and Spain, France and England, and no doubt elsewhere, from the trecento to the sixteenth century down to the battle of the books where both Temple and Wotton had to take their stand, dividing the world of rhetoric and poetic into still another world of ancients and moderns. Yet even more intriguingly, perhaps, the quarrel was pressed right into the vernaculars themselves where it became a contest now as to whether to transform English (for example) into a rotund Ciceronian or an elliptical pointed language, whether or not, in the words of George Williamson, to take the Senecan amble.[18] If style reflects the man—or at any rate his culture—it is hardly necessary to add that these relentless literary disputes had a larger significance than first appears and that may account for their singular acerbity and persistence.

[18]George Williamson, *The Senecan Amble: A Study in Prose from Bacon to Collier* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951). See also Morris W. Croll, *Style, Rhetoric and Rhythm*, ed. J. Max Patrick and R. O. Evans (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966).

But there was a second challenge. If the authority of ancient rhetoric was questioned by modern rhetoricians, so too ancient philosophy was deliberately countered now by the new natural philosophies of Bacon, Descartes, and the like. Above all, the Aristotle of the schoolmen was called into question and found wanting, even though Aristotle continued to furnish much of the basic material of the university and the training of the theologians and (even more awkwardly) an alternative Aristotle of rhetoric and poetic was freshly instituted. Here, as in the other camp, the depth of the rebellion against classical authority was a matter of degree and there were only a few who were ready to foresake the ancients altogether. It was Bacon, after all, who wrote *De Sapientia Veterum* and Newton who found that his new physics had been anticipated in Antiquity.[19] The 'perennial philosophy' was not easily dismissed. The Cambridge Platonists, Cudworth and More, and their many allies, Theophilus Gale, Edward Stillingfleet, even Thomas Burnet, whose *Archaeologia* Temple could now claim for his side, all wrote massive volumes in favor of either a *prisca theologia* or an ancient philosophy that went back behind the Greeks to the great Eastern sages, Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, even to Moses or Noah.[20] For some of these men—for Cudworth, for example—Hobbes and Descartes, for all their modern pretensions, were nothing more than ancients, mere revivers of classical atomism and atheism rather than innovators, and the whole struggle of ideas in the seventeenth century looked to him (however unfairly) like nothing more than a resumption of ancient conflict. Moreover, this conviction in an anterior wisdom, as well as an ancient folly, long remained vigorous, outliving the battle of the books and appearing in such popular and representative works as the Chevalier Ramsay's *Travels of Cyrus* (1727) and the

[19]Bacon is, of course, even better known for his advocacy of the moderns, but this was ambivalent, despite his claim in the *Advancement of Learning* that the moderns were the true ancients. For Newton's view that he had been anticipated in Antiquity by the Egyptians and the pre-Socratic philosophers, see J. E. McGuire and P. M. Rattansi, "Newton and the Pipes of Pan," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 21 (1966), 104–43.

[20]For the perennial philosophy generally, see Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964); D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1972). For Bacon, see Charles W. Lemmi, *The Classical Deities in Bacon* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1933); for Newton, see McGuire and Rattansi. For the neoplatonists and antiquity there is still no comprehensive account but there is a helpful bibliography in C. A. Patrides, *The Cambridge Platonists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969).

Universal History (1737–44).[21] Nevertheless, as Jones saw correctly, it was some of the natural philosophers who did mount one of the chief challenges to Antiquity, although characteristically he left out the French, despite the fact that the most radical of the moderns, Descartes and Malebranche, were well known and influential in England and early translated.

Now these two modern movements, the revolt against classical rhetoric and the revolt against classical philosophy, needed not and often did not coincide because of the long-standing antipathy between rhetoric and philosophy of every kind, although to be sure there were frequent points of contact. The neoplatonists were not much interested in Cicero or classical imitation and on the whole the wits had no use for either ancient or modern philosophy. The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns had, therefore, to be fought out over different objectives in largely different arenas. But if all this has the effect of complicating matters far beyond anything that Jones imagined, it appears that there was still one more issue that he overlooked altogether, another controversy that was rooted in the revival of Antiquity and that for a time came even to overshadow the rest. It was the quarrel over 'philology.'

This problem seems to have originated during the Renaissance in an unanticipated opposition that developed out of the very success of humanist grammarians and rhetoricians in recovering and elucidating the ancient authors. At first, it is true, all were allied in the basic effort of exhuming and imitating the classics, in forging a new *ancienneté*; but the process of recovery soon advanced to formidable proportions as the techniques of grammatical criticism—or what came to be known as philology—were sharpened and as the generations added to the stock of antique knowledge. When this happened, classical scholarship and classical imitation found themselves growing insidiously and unexpectedly at odds. On the one hand, the very instruments of classical scholarship, the

[21]Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* was printed first (London, 1678), abridged by Thomas Wise (London, 1706), reprinted by Thomas Birch (London, 1743), and translated into Latin with an elaborate commentary by J. L. Mosheim (Jena, 1733). This version was still admired in the nineteenth century when it was employed for a further English edition (London, 1845). Cudworth was Temple's teacher at Cambridge and Temple's essay was dedicated to his alma mater. The Chevalier Ramsay's work was published first in 1727 in French and English versions, enlarged in 1730, and republished many times thereafter. An appendix is entitled, "A Discourse upon the Theology and Mythology of the Ancients."

commentary, dictionary, index, above all, the footnote, all new and modern in their time, appeared to impede the desire for elegance and for eloquence. It was the same with that vast new world of material remains, now studied for the first time in the ponderous tomes of Renaissance antiquaries. On the other hand, the very advances in philological and archeological learning, the real addition to the understanding of classical authors that resulted, began to threaten the confidence in imitation and in the ancient wisdom on which the whole revival was based. To know Homer or Pythagoras too well was to open a gulf that divided them from modern life, rather than identifying them with it. It was in the end to make them useless in any immediate practical fashion. Of what value was the teaching of a poet who sang his songs aloud to a group of tribal warriors whose manners and customs seemed closer to the American Indian than the eighteenth-century gentleman? Thus the last crucial ingredient in the battle of the books was prepared through which alone can we appreciate the bitter contest that resulted between the 'wits' and the scholars, rhetoric and philology, 'polite' learning and erudition.

No doubt this is why, in the later stages of the battle, all attention was centered for a while on a single fierce question about the value and authenticity of one ancient work. It was, of course, the *Epistles of Phalaris*, those fraudulent letters of a late Greek sophist which pitted philology, in the hands of the redoubtable Richard Bentley, against rhetoric, in the hands of the Christ Church wits and the whole world of polite literature. Here, the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns took a new turn and for the time being philosophy and science were pretty much forgotten; here, was the real climax of Swift's satire, as in some ways it was the true climax of the quarrel.[22] Yet, even so, the battle went on, for the issue was not easily resolved and it is sometimes forgotten that the loud clamor that was raised against Pope's translation of the *Iliad* just a few years later was really another episode in the selfsame dispute—and another instance of the close connection with France where the battle over Homer was always accepted as the capstone of the quarrel. Indeed, *The Dunciad* and the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* were no mean blows in favor of the ancients, to pick out only the most notable in a new generation. And the *Epistles of Phalaris*,

[22]For bibliography, see Levine, "Ancients, Moderns and History."

despite the vigorous blows of the moderns, were for a long time still read and valued as genuine.[23] Thus the historian who would like to view the battle whole had better abandon Swift's premature account altogether, and Jones as well, and try to track the contest through the thickets of controversy down through the eighteenth century at least to the time of Edward Gibbon. But now he will find that throughout the struggle it was the classical scholars who were the avowed (and the most dangerous) of the moderns, sometimes allied with the anti-Ciceronians and the natural philosophers and sometimes not, but adding always to the fury and complexity of the quarrel.

What I have been suggesting then is that any complete account of the battle must begin by considering each of the different strands of argument for both the ancients and the moderns separately as they developed over long stretches of time before trying to thread them together into a whole. The quarrel, to embellish the usual military metaphor, was not so much a battle of the books, as a long series of skirmishes fought out upon a number of different battlefields for different objectives by combatants of varying degrees of commitment most of whom were satisfied in the end with a stalemate. Yet, notwithstanding all this confusion, there appears to be one perspective anyway from which it is possible to see all these mixed motives and different episodes as making up a kind of whole. For if the quarrel was not simply about science or literature, philosophy or rhetoric, erudition or imitation, it was, I believe, always and everywhere about history, about the meaning and use of the past and about the method of apprehending it. (This is, of course, an inversion of the usual view that it was a quarrel about the future, which was only partly true.) Here was one issue that in a sense underlay all the rest. And here it was that both the ancients and the moderns loosed their heaviest artillery, though here too they fought to a standstill.

History was the nub of the contest because wherever one started, whether it was with literature or philosophy, the arts or the sciences, the dispute was always about the purposes of the past, about its usefulness and authority in the present. The ancients of 1700 defended it, of course, at least that special part of the past which they designated as classical, as offering models for practical life in the

[23]Thomas Francklin, ed., *The Epistles of Phalaris* (London, 1749), pp. iii–xvi.

present. The moderns hesitated, unsure how far to accept that authority, persuaded that in some cases they had already matched or excelled the classics and half-convinced that later times should be left free to follow their own bent. In this way the comparisons began, the best of Antiquity against the best of modernity, in what turned out to be a vain attempt to prove the superiority of the one over the other in all fields of human endeavor. Long before Wotton tried to meet Temple's arguments with a canvass of the field of learning, in which each of the ancients was paired with a modern, the feat had been attempted by Tassoni in Italy, by Glanvill in England, by Perrault in France, and less systematically by others before and since.[24] The effort proved vain because the field had to be divided. It was soon clear that the ancient superiority in natural science and technology was indeed under serious challenge by the moderns, though many, including Swift and Temple, remained recalcitrant; while, on the other hand, the field of eloquence, that is to say, rhetoric and poetry, history, oratory, moral philosophy, even the arts and architecture (in effect, the whole *studia humanitatis* of Cicero and the Renaissance humanists), remained for both parties still in the hands of the ancients.[25] Was Cicero ever so popular or so imitated as in eighteenth-century England, even in the hands of so thorough a modern as David Hume? If there were a few really radical moderns who stood ready to deny this concession, they were almost exclusively Frenchmen and very much in the minority. It was Wotton among others who saw the difference between those fields of human endeavor that were truly cumulative and those that were not, those that were capable of improvement and those that appeared to have already reached perfection, and the eighteenth century on the whole followed suit. If the moderns remained still critical of the absolute authority of the ancient models in the humanities, more ready than the ancients to acknowledge that even Homer could nod upon occasion (a thought that they borrowed, of course, from Horace!), and ready from time to time to hint at originality as a virtue, they yet continued to accept the classical authors

[24]Alessandro Tassoni, *Dieci libri di pensieri diversi* (Carpi, 1620), Book 10; Joseph Glanvill, *Plus Ultra: or the Progress and Advancement of Knowledge* (London, 1668); Charles Perrault, *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1688–96).

[25]Wotton was willing to concede all these except architecture where he remained equivocal, quoting Perrault at length but indecisively; see *Reflections*, pp. 63–68.

and artists as the ultimate standards in life and art. The moderns thought that the classics might be rivaled as well as imitated—on occasion even surpassed—but only by doing the very same kind of thing. They sought no new ground for the humanities because (like their rivals) they could not conceive new ground possible. And so they sacrificed Shakespeare and Dante, among many others, despite some nagging doubts. In their acceptance of the alternative notions of imitation or emulation, the ancients and the moderns were both committing themselves to the same Renaissance view of history, to the idea that the whole of the human past could be divided into three large periods, Antiquity, the Dark or Middle Ages, and Modern Times. They accepted that the revival of Antiquity was the beginning of their own time, only disputing about the invention of modern philosophy in the dissemination of light. As always, there was much agreement beneath the noise of battle.

But if pairing of authors and periodization of the past allowed for a certain measure of agreement about the meaning of history, disagreement was more profound about the method of history. Perhaps on no other contested ground was there so real a disparity between the two sides. Each argued for a way of reconstructing the past that was not only different but in the end antithetical to the other. So the ancients, true to their general purposes, proposed that all history must be narrative, composed after the fashion of the classical models, especially (though not exclusively) after the Romans, Livy and Tacitus, who furnished alternative models of style. A history, therefore, must be a piece of rhetoric governed by the precepts of Cicero or Lucian, shapely in its artistic prose, eloquent in its set-piece descriptions and speeches, teaching morality and politics by example. In this way the ancient works were actually taught in school as literature, read at the university, translated into English, and imitated in practice. And on this point, typically, the moderns were willing to concede a great deal, indeed almost everything except the idea that they were doomed to failure in the attempt to beat the ancients at their own game.[26]

Where the argument really erupted was when the moderns proposed an alternative kind of history, not necessarily better but entirely distinct, almost without precedent and decidedly new. It was when Wotton proposed that philology and antiquities were of them-

[26]Levine, "Ancients, Moderns and History," 54–75.

selves a kind of history, a way of penetrating into the whole life of the past and recovering things otherwise unknown, a topical and analytical alternative to narrative, that Temple and his friends were most incredulous. But Wotton was really claiming this kind of history for science, not for literature. Perhaps he exaggerated when he argued that the corrections and annotations of modern scholarship had required more "fineness of thought and happiness of invention" than the originals themselves and that a modern could know more about the ancient world than even a contemporary.[27] But Temple and the wits objected to the very idea that philological and antiquarian activities produced any kind of real knowledge, or that the topical accumulation of detail in the ponderous and very unrhetorical tomes of the scholars could possibly be useful.[28] It was no help to suggest that the narratives of the ancients could thus be examined and even corrected in the light of a superior knowledge—*that* was the very danger that the new erudition seemed to pose for the authority and perfection of the classics. Nor could one argue that antiquarian lore was useful to the men of the world who needed the practical wisdom of the statesman, that is, history teaching by example. Scholarship like science might have to justify itself by its fruits but it was not entirely obvious in 1700 just what those fruits might be apart from the destruction of cherished beliefs.

Here, then, was an argument that was not resolved. The wits poured down their satire on the scholars in works that we still read with amusement; the scholars replied with weighty volumes that lie dusty on our shelves. To that extent the ancients proved themselves right. On the other hand, their satire covered over a real uneasiness and in their own way the scholars could claim an ironic last laugh. For the accumulation of knowledge which had carried them far indeed beyond the early humanists and proved indisputably the progressive character of the modern historical discipline at last helped to bring down the whole artful edifice in which they like the ancients believed. In the end, we know that the classics were banished from the curriculum, and with them the ancient narratives and the teaching of practical wisdom by example and the idea of a *prisca theologia*—although it took a very long time to accomplish. If eventually the footnote came to reign, and we now know vastly

[27] *Reflections*, p. 318.
[28] Temple, "Some Thoughts," note 7 above, p. 259.

more about the ancients (even, perhaps, about the ancients and the moderns!) than anyone before, it is, just as Wotton supposed, because the moderns were also right, right that is about the method of history, and destined to a share in the victory.

If the battle of the books began in 1690 with Temple's essay, as a resumption of hostilities that were centuries old, it was, therefore, the argument between literature and learning that alone could be said to be new. All the other ideas had long been debated and even the tension between polish and erudition had been long brewing. But now for the first time it was thoroughly aired and self-consciously argued. If we need an end to our quarrel then, we should perhaps look for it in those later skirmishes of Pope with the scholars, with Bentley again and his curious edition of Milton, or with Theobald and his Shakespeare, though there is a strong temptation to pursue it even later into the midcentury debate about imitation and originality, or perhaps still later to the 'Gothic revival' and the growing taste for the nonclassical centuries of European history.[29] There is, of course, a sense in which the same arguments are still alive in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. But if there is one satisfactory conclusion to the quarrel, a true moment of culmination in the growing self-consciousness about all these many issues, it was perhaps that instant when Edward Gibbon conceived his lifework. If history is the key to the quarrel, then Gibbon is the historian who best unlocks it. He was not the first to try to compose the difficulties that still divided the world of his time into ancients and moderns but he was the closest of anyone to succeed. From his youth he was preoccupied with the problem.[30] *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is the climactic work of eighteenth-century historiography, perhaps of the whole historiography of Western culture to its time. It attempted deliberately to combine all the best in the achievement of both the ancients *and* the moderns, classical rhetoric *and* the new philology, ancient narrative *and* modern schol-

[29]Among many explicit discussions in the periodicals, see for example, *The Adventurer*, 49 (1753), 127, 133 (1754); *The Royal Magazine*, 9 (1763); James Boswell, "On Past and Present," *Hypochondriack* (1782), ed. Marjory Bailey (Palo Alto, Calif.; Stanford University Press, 1928), pp. 141–49; *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*, I (1785). See also W. J. Lorimer, "A Neglected Aspect of the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes," *Modern Language Review*, 51 (1956), 179–85; A. Owen Aldrich, "Ancients and Moderns in the Eighteenth Century," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Scribner, 1968), I, 76–87.

[30]See his *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (Paris, 1761).

arship, and if it failed to synthesize them completely, as seems to have happened, then that failure was itself fateful to the future course of historical writing.[31] After Gibbon, and to some extent because of Gibbon, although the quarrel carried on, the terrain changed notably. We are at last on the verge of a truly modern sensibility, one, that is to say, contemporary with our own but perhaps only fully intelligible if we can understand the soil from which it sprang. Here perhaps is the best excuse for a reconsideration of that noisy quarrel, that tempest in a teapot that Swift labeled for all time the battle of the books, and that went on for generation after generation to trouble the European mind and to raise so many unexpected issues about both past and future, some of which at least remain to trouble us today.

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[31]See, for example, the review at Göttingen in the *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen* (1788), claiming superiority for German source criticism, cited by Arnaldo Momigliano in "Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method," *Studies in Historiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 40; and Herbert Butterfield, "The Rise of the German Historical School," *Man on His Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1955), pp. 51–61. For a good statement of the new historiography, see Helmut D. Schmidt, "Schlözer on Historiography," *History and Theory*, 18 (1979), 37–51. It should be remembered that Gibbon wrote his history entirely from his own library.