



**HAL**  
open science

# The “Lights” before the Enlightenment: The Tribunal of Reason and Public Opinion

Céline Spector

► **To cite this version:**

Céline Spector. The “Lights” before the Enlightenment: The Tribunal of Reason and Public Opinion. A. Matytsin et D. Edelstein. *Let There Be Enlightenment*, Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 86-102, 2018. hal-02479804

**HAL Id: hal-02479804**

**<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-02479804v1>**

Submitted on 14 Feb 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## The “Lights” before the Enlightenment: The Tribunal of Reason and Public Opinion<sup>1</sup>

Céline Spector

The appearance of the phrase “the century of lights” (*siècle des lumières*) has been a subject of a number of recent studies.<sup>2</sup> The work of Roland Mortier has been particularly helpful in paving the way for new avenues of research: Mortier has argued that the appearance of the plural form of the metaphor “the lights” (*les lumières*) in France can be dated back to the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> Considered in a religious context, the metaphor of light was transposed onto the secular terrain of the “natural light” thanks to René Descartes and his disciples. My goal in this essay is to determine the moment at which the idea of a “century of lights” first appeared. The novelist and historian Charles Sorel denounced the tendency of his age to define itself with reference to enlightenment as early as 1671: “This century is well enlightened, for one hardly hears of anything but lights. One puts this word everywhere in place of where one used to use ‘mind’ or ‘intelligence’; and it often happens that those who use this word apply it so badly, that one might say they see nothing at all with all of their lights.”<sup>4</sup> In the April 1684 issue of the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, Pierre Bayle proclaimed himself to be in favor of a rigorous method in historical research that would allow his century to be properly praised: “Will it be said [...] that we have abandoned the honor of this century to the ridicule of those of who came after us? [...] One prides oneself of being extremely enlightened in this century: and yet, perhaps one has never had more audacity to make up fables.”<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, it seems tempting to oppose the lights (of autonomous reason) to the darkness (*ténèbres*) of prejudice, to the reliance on traditional authorities, and to the barbarism of fanaticism and superstition. In 1732, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, the perpetual secretary of the

---

<sup>1</sup> « The “Lights” before the Enlightenment: The Tribunal of Reason and Public Opinion », in *Let There Be Enlightenment*, A. Matytsin et D. Edelstein eds., Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018, p. 86-102. This article is a revised version of a contribution that appeared under the title “Les lumières avant les Lumières: tribunal de la raison et opinion publique.” (<http://revolution-francaise.net/2009/03/01/299-les-lumieres-avant-les-lumieres-tribunal-de-la-raison-et-opinion-publique>). After having written this essay, I have learned of an existence of an article by D. Ribaud entitled “Les lumières avant les Lumières? Historiographie de l’opinion publique et discours d’auteurs (dix-septième siècle),” in *SV/EC* 2006:12, 65–74. However, the subject matter discussed there is of radically different nature from my topic here. The article was translated from French by Anton M. Matytsin.

<sup>2</sup> See Fritz Schalk, “Zur Semantik von ‘Aufklärung’ in Frankreich,” in *Festschrift W. Von Wartburg* (Tübingen: Niemayer, 1968), 251–266; Jacques Roger, “La lumière et les lumières,” in *Cahiers de l’Association internationale des études françaises XX* (1968): 167–177; Roland Mortier, “Lumière” et “Lumières”, histoire d’une image et d’une idée au XVII<sup>e</sup> et au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Clartés et ombres du siècle des Lumières* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 13–59; Michel Delon, “Les Lumières. Travail d’une métaphore,” in *Studies on Voltaire*, no. 152 (1976), 527–541. For more on the historiography of the Enlightenment and its link with the debates about the origins of the French Revolution, see Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, “Le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: l’identité refusée. Les Lumières et la Révolution française,” in *Le Monde des Lumières*, ed. Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 497–522.

<sup>3</sup> Furetière’s dictionary affirms that “when light signifies the *belles connaissances* of the mind, it should always appear in the plural.” See Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (The Hague: Husson, Johnson, Swart, Van Duren, Le Vier, and Van Dole, 1690), v.3, Art. “Lumière.”

<sup>4</sup> Charles Sorel, *De la connoissance des bons livres, ou Examens de plusieurs auteurs* (Paris: Pralard, 1671), 454–455.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bayle, “Vienne deux fois assiégée par les Turcs en 1529 & 1683 & heureusement délivrée, avec des Reflexions historiques sur la Maison d’Autriche, & sur la Puissance Ottomane, par. M. J.B. de Rocoles Hisoriographe,” *Nouvelles de la République des lettres* (April 1684): 169–170.

Académie des sciences, illustrated this combative attitude in expressing his desire to disperse the darkness that posed an obstacle to the expression of the truth: “For some time, an almost entirely new philosophical spirit [*esprit philosophique*] has spread all over, [it is] a light that hardly enlightened our ancestors.”<sup>6</sup> In discussing the merits of Antoine Houdar de La Motte’s literary works, Fontenelle took up the defense of his modern party and criticized the Ancients, whom one now only read “out of duty” and no longer “for pleasure,” as was the case with the Moderns. As Roland Mortier has noted, a number of Enlightenment thinkers, including Montesquieu, Turgot, Voltaire, and the *Encyclopédistes* followed Fontenelle’s lead in praising the Moderns and extolling the literary and philosophical achievements of their century. In the *Encyclopédie* article “Gens de Lettres,” Voltaire proclaimed the following with enthusiasm:

Previously, in the sixteenth century, and well before the seventeenth, literary scholars spent a lot of time on grammatical criticism of Greek and Latin authors; and it is to their labors that we owe the dictionaries, the accurate editions, the commentaries on the masterpieces of antiquity; today this criticism is less necessary, and the philosophical spirit has succeeded it. It is this philosophical spirit that seems to constitute the character of men of letters; and when it is combined with good taste, it forms an accomplished literary scholar. One of the great advantages of our century, is the number of educated men who [can] pass from the thorns of Mathematics to the flowers of Poetry, and who [are able to] judge equally well a book of Metaphysics and a theatrical play: the spirit of the century has rendered them for the most part as suitable for society as for [solitary] scholarship; and this is what makes them superior to those of previous centuries.<sup>7</sup>

In the “*Tableau de l’esprit humain au milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*” that opens his *Essai sur les éléments de philosophie* (1759), the co-editor of the *Encyclopédie* Jean-Baptiste le Rond D’Alembert similarly maintained that “Every century that thinks well or thinks poorly, provided that it believes that it thinks and that it thinks differently from the century that preceded it, adorns itself with the title of philosophical; [...] Our century has thus called itself supremely the *century of philosophy*.”<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau diagnosed the mutations of his century in a way that deplored the vanity of his contemporaries: “We live in a climate and a century of philosophy and of reason. The lights of all the sciences seem to come together at the same time to enlighten our eyes and to guide us in this obscure labyrinth of human life. The greatest geniuses of all the ages bring together their lessons to teach us, immense libraries are open to the public, from infancy a multitude of colleges and universities offer us the experience and meditation of 4000 years [...] And have we become better or wiser from this?”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, “Réponse de Fontenelle à l’évêque de Luçon, lorsqu’il fut reçu à l’Académie française, le 6 mars 1732,” in *Œuvres de Fontenelle* (Paris: Salmon, 1829), v.2, 442.

<sup>7</sup> Voltaire, Art. “Gens de Lettres,” in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton & Durand, 1757), v.7, 599.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert, *Essai sur les éléments de philosophie, ou sur les principes des connaissances humaines*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Slatkine, 1967), v. 1, 122. Also see the *Correspondance littéraire*, v. 10 (August 1774), 465.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettres morales*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), v.4, 1088.

This essay aims to locate the emergence of a consciousness of the age in the eighteenth century—a consciousness that preceded the development of the formal discipline of the philosophy of history. How can we understand that birth of a historical consciousness that would allow Immanuel Kant to theorize about the Enlightenment not only according to its motto (“dare to know” [*sapere aude*], have the courage to use your own understanding” and liberate yourself from religious and political tutelage) but also according to its self-reflexivity—the ability, for the first time, to think of the present that is one’s own and that truly makes up an epoch? Michel Foucault’s interpretation evokes the essential element here, in so far as he less interested in discovering the origin of the word than in understanding what enabled a change of perspective by virtue of which the century itself became the object of its own interrogation and evaluation.<sup>10</sup> This essay thus aims to make sense of the transition from “lights” to “the Enlightenment” (*des lumières aux Lumières*) and to understand how the term “century of lights” came to designate an era with unstable boundaries. This question does not only concern a verbal transformation and the appearance of a new phrase: the historical investigation would remain incomplete unless one poses the question about the conditions that enabled the invention the Enlightenment as self-reflexive category. The origins and nature of a consciousness that allowed a century to think of itself as “a century of thought” need to be analyzed. Without resorting to social and cultural history that have recently seen major works on this question, I will focus on the history of philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

I wish to advance the following hypothesis: the phrase “century of lights” appeared at the precise moment of the constitution of the “tribunal of public opinion”—a tribunal that was dedicated to judging intellectual accomplishments and evaluating their progress over time. Giuseppe Ricuperati has already established the role of literary history in the emergence of periodization and in the appearance of the self-reflexive category of the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Diego Venturino has shown the importance of the historical paintings after the French Revolution.<sup>13</sup> However, reflections about the appropriate means of judging artistic and literary works and about the proper tribunal for evaluating the merit of intellectual accomplishments appeared well before the Revolution. In this essay, I argue that that the constitution of the tribunal of public opinion was the prerequisite condition for the emergence of the Enlightenment as a historiographical concept. The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns played a decisive role in this process. Without revisiting the controversy surrounding the interpretations of the Quarrel (whether it was a culture war, a simple polemical contest in which the Ancients were assigned the role of conservatives, and where the Moderns were the most fervent supporters of Louis XIV’s absolutist regime and even of

---

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?,” in *Dits et Ecrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), v.2, 1381–1397.

<sup>11</sup> One must not, of course, exclude references such as one that appears d’Alembert’s *Essai sur la société des gens de lettres et des grands*, where the Enlightenment is described as a social phenomenon, whereby a man of letters operates under the patronage of the state and of the aristocracy. For more, see Hans U. Gumbrecht, “Who were the *philosophes*?” in *Making Sense in Life and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 133–177 and Daniel Brewer, *The Enlightenment Past. Reconstructing eighteenth-century French thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Giuseppe Ricuperati, “Le categorie di periodizzazione e il Settecento. Per una introduzione storiografica,” *Studi settecenteschi* 14, (1994): 9–106.

<sup>13</sup> Diego Venturino, “L’historiographie révolutionnaire française et les Lumières, de Paul Buzet à Albert Sorel,” and Diego Venturino, “Appendice sur la genèse de l’expression ‘siècle des lumières’ (XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles),” both in *Historiographie et Usages des Lumières*, ed. Giuseppe Ricuperati (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2002), 21–58 and 59–83.

ethnocentrism), I hope to locate the origins of historicism in these debates.<sup>14</sup> The emergence of a historical consciousness took place at a moment when the contest between the Ancients and Moderns was at its most heated point, and when each side tried to mobilize the best arguments in favor of or against the superiority of their present age in the domains of science, politics, ethics, and aesthetics. Having brought attention to the “century of Louis the Great,” Charles Perrault, the leader of the Modern party, developed the tendency of using this concept with reference to historical periodization, and he forced the Ancients, led by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, to define themselves in response.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the following paradox emerged: the transition from “lights” to the “Enlightenment” is not only the product of the militant arguments marshalled by the partisans of the Moderns, but it is also a result of the claims of the supporters of the Ancients, who were critical of the notion of the progress of the philosophical spirit. From Hillaire-Bernard de Longepierre to Jean-Baptiste Dubos, we will thus find a singular gallery of portraits that will reshape our traditional view of the Enlightenment.<sup>16</sup>

### **I. The Tribunal of Reason vs. The Tribunal of Public Opinion**

It has not been sufficiently noted that the origin of historiographical categorization derived from a conceptual displacement: at first, it was the mind that was described as “enlightened” or “philosophical”; it was the mind that received light, whether divine or natural; it was the mind that enlightened itself by fighting against the blindness of prejudice or the darkness of ignorance and superstition. How did it come to be, then, that it was no longer the mind, but rather the century that became qualified as “philosophical,” “enlightened,” or “of lights”?

Without a doubt, it is necessary to explain the factors that gave rise to the “charts of the progress of the human mind” in the emergence of the history of philosophy. In fact, what is often attributed to d’Alembert, Voltaire, or Turgot had earlier roots: from the end of the seventeenth century, Cartesianism and empiricism brought about debates about the origins of ideas and the genealogy of human knowledge, about the training of the mind at the individual, societal, and universal level. It is in this context that it became suitable to think about the progress of the human mind, about the factors that hamper the development of its faculties, and about those that stimulate its improvement. According to Fontenelle, cultivated minds possess the achievements and knowledge of all the minds that preceded them. It is the accumulation and the diffusion of

---

<sup>14</sup> The interpretation of the Quarrel as a *fin de siècle* culture war appears in Joan Dejean, *Anciens against Moderns. Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997). Dejean supports the perspective of the Moderns by proposing a gendered analysis of the Quarrel. By contrast, Larry Norman attempts to change our view of the Quarrel by pointing to the shock experienced by the Ancients, who were hardly traditionalists. Norman sees the partisans of the Ancients as the precursors of historicist thinking, who were able to perceive the radical otherness of the ancient world, and he presents the Moderns as more conservative and conformist. See Larry Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient. Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011). For a nuanced critique of Norman’s thesis, see: Marie-Pierre Harder, “Les Anciens contre-attaquent ou la Querelle revisitée,” *Acta fabula* 13, no. 1. January 2012, URL: <http://www.fabula.org/acta/document6731.php>

<sup>15</sup> For more on this semantic evolution, see Hillel Schwartz, *Century’s End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 1990s through the 1990s* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> For a remarkable contribution on this topic, with which this essay is in great agreement, see Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

knowledge that accounts for the transition from *an enlightened mind* to *an enlightened century*.<sup>17</sup> However, this transition presupposes another important transformation: what is in play is no longer a notion, according to which God, by his grace, touches the mind with his light; nor is it the Cartesian concept of a natural light that enlightens the mind by putting it in touch with clear and distinct ideas. From this point on, what matters is the production and the diffusion of knowledge. In order to be able to think of a “century of lights,” one must be able to reflect on the means by which knowledge, emancipated from theology and speculative metaphysics, becomes recognized and disseminated in public. In the scientific domain, the perception of an epistemological rupture that occurred thanks to individual geniuses (the Galilean, Cartesian, or Newtonian “revolution”) often takes priority over an analysis of the cultural and political conditions of the production of knowledge. The reception of scientific texts should be conceived of as a process of transmission in the context of academies and learned societies. However, when it comes to evaluating works of art, there needs to be a criterion of merit that does not solely consist in the understanding of a single individual, who secretly engages in observation in his study or undertakes experiments in a laboratory.

What is the appropriate tribunal in this case, and where might one find a qualified judge? For the ancients, who saw themselves as the heirs of Bacon and Descartes, this court was undoubtedly the tribunal of reason. Nicolas Malebranche testified to this in the preface to *De la recherche de la vérité* (1674). He presented God as the source of “the light of truth that enlightens the whole world,”<sup>18</sup> because even those who are plunged in vice remain united to the truth.<sup>19</sup> Saint Augustine served as Malebranche’s source here: it is the burden of the body and of the sensible world that prevents human beings from contemplating the eternal truth; it is the body that pulls man away from the presence of God “or from the interior light that enlightens him.”<sup>20</sup> Man is constantly at risk of being blinded by the senses, by the imagination, and by the passions.<sup>21</sup> It is thus necessary to make sure that reason does not get lost or blind itself with the false glamor of the imagination: “It is necessary that the mind judges all things according to the interior lights, without listening to the false and confused testimony of the senses and of the imagination; and [that] it examines all the human sciences according to the pure light of truth that enlightens it...”<sup>22</sup>

What then is the proper criterion of truth? And how can it be recognized in an age of corruption? In a crucial passage in the same preface, Malebranche associated the theme of light with that of a tribunal (of reason) that could offer judgments that opposed established opinions.

---

<sup>17</sup> Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes*, in *Œuvres de Fontenelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), v.2, 425–426, n. s. “La comparaison que nous avons de faire des hommes de tous les siècles à un seul homme, peut s’étendre sur toute notre question des Anciens et des Modernes. Un bon esprit cultivé est, pour ainsi dire, composé de tous les esprits des siècles précédents; ce n’est qu’un même esprit qui s’est cultivé pendant tout ce temps-là. Ainsi cet homme qui a vécu depuis le commencement du monde jusqu’à présent, a eu son enfance, où il ne s’est occupé que des besoins les plus pressants de la vie; sa jeunesse, où il a assez bien réussi aux choses d’imagination, telles que la poésie ou l’éloquence, et où même il a commencé à raisonner, mais avec moins de solidité que de feu. Il est maintenant dans l’âge de la virilité, où il raisonne avec plus de force, et a plus de lumières que jamais.”

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), v.1, 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Malebranche affirmed that one must not be afraid, when rendering one's work public, of shocking opinions established over the course of centuries:

So that my hopes are not in vain, I give this counsel: that you should not be immediately repelled if you find here things that shock the ordinary views that you have held your whole life and that you have seen generally approved by all men down through the ages. For these are the most general errors that I mainly seek to destroy. If men were fully enlightened, then universal consent would be a [valid] argument; but just the opposite is the case. Be advised them once and for all, that only reason should stand in judgment on all human opinions that are not related to faith, in which God alone instructs us in an entirely different way from that in which he reveals natural things to us. Let us enter into ourselves and draw near the light that constantly shines there so that our reason might be more illuminated.<sup>23</sup>

The tribunal of reason thus stands against the tribunal of opinion, because reason alone is the source of lights, and opinion has no legitimacy in the search after the truth. However, this postulate of a solipsistic reason that is in touch with its own light, was called into question in considerations concerning the enlightened century that could grant a positive value to the judgments of opinion.

After the Quarrel of the Cid, which saw the first appearance of the concept of a "public," called upon to judge literary works,<sup>24</sup> the role of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns became crucial: for if Descartes left questions of taste outside the scope of evidence, the criterion for judging literature and art was even more uncertain. Malebranche furtively took on this question by siding against the ancients and against the testimony of authority: it is absurd to imagine, he claimed, "that the ancients were more enlightened than we could ever be, and that there is nothing to be achieved in matters where they did not succeed."<sup>25</sup> But in questions that do not concern science and philosophy, should the tribunal of reason take precedence over the tribunal of opinion? If the criterion for evaluating the quality of literary and artistic works is no longer one of objective certainty that can be guaranteed by one's inner conscience, then it can become something that issued by the public, and thus by public opinion.

## II. The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns

In one sense, the nineteenth-century debates about which thinkers were and were not part of the Enlightenment had an antecedent in another, earlier exercise of inventory. Just as the Enlightenment was invented through reflections on the philosophical origins of the French Revolution, the notion of an enlightened century developed out of the critique of the great thinkers (philosophers, orators, and poets) of antiquity, who were accused of not conforming to the ideals of refinement, politeness, and gallantry of the age of Louis XIV. This critical inventory allowed for the deployment of a self-reflexive analysis on the century. The Quarrel was particularly important in reflecting on the technical and scientific progress and of the fine arts, especially of poetry and

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 17-18, n. 5.

<sup>24</sup> See Dejean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 34–35.

<sup>25</sup> Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité*, v.1, 210–214.

eloquence. By provoking a rupture in the imitation of ancient models, the proponents of modern knowledge and the institutions that supported them allowed for the improvement of the arts.

This question first appeared in the polemical exchange between Charles Perrault and Longepierre, an eminent translator of ancient Greek works who immediately responded to the *Siècle de Louis-le-Grand* (1687). Perrault claimed that it was necessary to abandon the errors of the past and to rely on one's own lights. Longepierre responded in his *Discours sur les Anciens* (1687) by claiming the force of the lights for the Ancient party.<sup>26</sup> However, the lights upon which he relied were the experience of the Ancients, and they stood opposed to the "lights of reason alone" that the Moderns championed.<sup>27</sup> By denouncing the blind presentism of the Moderns, which he attributed to their pride, Longepierre maintained that "the greatest men have regarded the Ancients as a source of light, as the only rule of good taste, and as the sanctuary of right reason and good sense."<sup>28</sup> He retraced the brief history of the West, noting the rebirth of lights after a period of medieval barbarism: "The dark forces of ignorance and barbarism were soon entirely dispersed by such an abundant source of light."<sup>29</sup> It was necessary to turn to the Ancients, because enlightened men who had taken them as a model in the past could not have been misled. Universal consent served as the guarantor of the truth.<sup>30</sup> Of course, "the torrent of opinion" was not a certain mark of the truth, but it allowed one to attain a level of reasonable verisimilitude. To prove the contrary, Longepierre insisted, "it is necessary to clearly convince me that the esteem we have for the Ancients hurts the lights of reason," which could not be the case.<sup>31</sup> It was also important to trust the heart, which judged beauty without error, he maintained: "if the mind and reason can be and are always seduced by the false light that only enlightens them in order to deceive them," the heart, by contrast, cannot err.<sup>32</sup> From this it followed that in judging the quality of artistic and literary productions, the tribunal of opinion that favored the Ancients could not be eclipsed by the tribunal of reason.

The Moderns were thus not alone in claiming to possess the lights. In making the case against universal rationalism, the Ancients were driven to justify the historical and cultural relativity of customs and traditions. As Larry Norman has recently shown, their loyalty to ancient models of conduct drove them to form a self-reflexive awareness of the unique nature of their own nation and their own age. Without advocating for a "counter-culture" that could call into question the legitimacy of the absolutist regime, and without freeing themselves of the strategies of cultural hegemony, the partisans of Homer, who refused to accept the disparagements cast on the "barbaric" centuries, contributed to the emergence of a historical consciousness that was not reducible to naïve progressivism. A partisan of the Ancients such as the abbé Dubos, who intervened in the second

---

<sup>26</sup> Hillaire-Bernard de Longepierre, *Discours sur les anciens* (Paris: Aubouin, 1687), preface, n.p. "La vérité, surtout lorsqu'elle est aussi évidente qu'en cette occasion, a un certain éclat et une certaine force qui perce tous les nuages, et qui surmonte tous les obstacles qu'on ose en vain lui opposer. Elle frappe la vue de ceux même qui veulent fermer les yeux à sa lumière...."

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Longepierre asks: "...n'est-ce pas en quelque manière prostituer la raison que de leur en opposer les lumières, qu'ils font vanité de mépriser?"

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



phase of the Quarrel, offered a profound reflection on the century of lights.<sup>33</sup> It was informed by a novel distinction between the physical and moral causes of genius. A disciple of Locke and, in this sense a Modern, Dubos was quite familiar with the English empiricists. However, he remained a steadfast supporter of the Ancients in matters of aesthetics. According to Dubos, progress in the natural sciences came as a result of the accumulation of discoveries. At the same time, he argued, the poets and orators of Louis XIV's century did not surpass their ancient predecessors: "we do not reason better than the ancients in matters of history, politics, or civic morals."<sup>34</sup> As a result of his research into the physical and moral causes of the superiority of the "illustrious centuries," that have featured numerous geniuses, Dubos claimed "that the veneration for the great authors of Antiquity will always last" and asked "whether it is true that we reason better than the ancients."<sup>35</sup> Thus, while Dubos recognized that natural philosophy has improved since antiquity, he did not argue that there had been a general progress of reason or of the arts.<sup>36</sup> In his view, factual knowledge could be accumulated over time, but individual minds remained the same. Of course, one could certainly praise the moderns when it came to the art of reasoning and the method for acquiring knowledge:

If one is to judge by the state of the natural sciences, [it is clear] how much our century is more enlightened than the ages of Plato, Augustus, and Leo X. The perfection to which we have been carried by the art of reasoning that has allowed us to make so many discoveries in the natural sciences is a fertile source of new lights. These lights already spread themselves on the *belles-lettres* and they make old prejudices [in that domain] vanish as they did in the natural sciences. The lights will pass on to different professions, and one can already perceive the twilight in all situations.<sup>37</sup>

But does this mean that human beings have necessarily become wiser or more reasonable? One must not confuse the amount of knowledge possessed by people in a particular age with reasonableness, Dubos insisted: "Our century may be more knowledgeable than those that preceded it, but I deny that today, generally speaking, the minds have more insight, more uprightness, and more precision than they did in the past. Just as the most learned men are not always those that have the most sense, so the century that is most knowledgeable than others is not always the most

---

<sup>33</sup> The Quarrel is traditionally divided into two phases. The first part, 1687–1694, concludes with the "peace" between Boileau and Perrault. The second phase, lasting from 1710 until 1716, is rekindled by Houdar de la Motte's publication of Madame Dacier's 1699 translation of the *Iliad*.

<sup>34</sup> Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (Paris: Mariette, 1733), v.2, 485. A diplomat and author of the *Interests of the Angleterre mal-entendus dans la guerre présent* (1703), Dubos was elected to the Académie française in 1720 and named perpetual secretary in 1722. His *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie française dans les Gaules* (1734) was analyzed and criticized by Montesquieu: see Céline Spector, *Montesquieu. Liberté, Droit et histoire* (Paris: Michalon, 2010), chapter 6. An intellectual biography of Dubos remains to be written.

<sup>35</sup> Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, v.2, 128. "Section XII: Des siècles illustres et de la part que les causes morales ont au progrès des arts."; v.2, 237. "Section XIV: Comment il se peut faire que les causes physiques aient part à la destinée des siècles illustres..."; v.2, 452. "Section XXXIII: Que la vénération pour les bons Auteurs de l'antiquité durera toujours. S'il est vrai que nous raisonnions mieux que les anciens."

<sup>36</sup> Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, v.2, 452–453. "La perfection où nous avons porté l'art de raisonner, qui nous a fait faire tant de découvertes dans les sciences naturelles, est une source féconde en nouvelles lumières. Elles se répandent déjà sur les Belles-Lettres, et elles y feront disparaître les vieux préjugés, ainsi qu'elles les ont fait disparaître dans les sciences naturelles." Also cited in *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, éd. Marc Fumaroli (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 422. Also see his introduction to this volume: Marc Fumaroli, "Les abeilles et les araignées," in *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, 8–218.

<sup>37</sup> Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, v.2, 453–454.

reasonable century.”<sup>38</sup> If we surpass the Ancients with respect to “speculative reason,” they outdo us in “practical reason.”<sup>39</sup>

Dubos thus contemplated the meaning and significance of the terms “enlightened century” or the “century of lights” well before the official appearance of “the Enlightenment” as a historical category. The century that inherited the discoveries of Bacon and Descartes, of Harvey and Copernicus, could be called the “century of lights,” in so far as it witnessed the improvement in the natural philosophy. However, the dissemination of these lights did not necessarily form enlightened minds. In this sense, it is necessary to reject the thesis according to which the emergence and spread of the “philosophical spirit” produced a scientific, artistic, moral, and political rupture. Indeed, Dubos observed, its perverse effects could even spark a new age of barbarism:

This date of seventy years [circa 1650] that we give to the age of this supposed renewal of the minds is poorly chosen. I do not wish to enter into odious details about the states and about the particulars, and I will content myself with stating that the philosophical spirit, which renders men so reasonable and, so to speak, so logical, will do the same thing to a great part of Europe that the Goths and the Vandals had done, assuming that it continues to make the same advance that it has for the last seventy years. I see essential arts being neglected, prejudices most useful to the preservation of society abolished, and speculative reasoning preferred to practical [matters]. We conduct ourselves without regard for experience, which is the best teacher that humankind has ever had, and we imprudently act as if we were the first generation that has known how to reason. The concern for posterity is entirely neglected.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, well before Rousseau, Dubos refused to grant the Moderns an exclusive claim to progress.<sup>41</sup> The generation that considers itself a pioneer conceals the negative effects of a one-sided and impoverishing development of reason; it praises itself all the more comfortably if it lacks vision and depth of field. Had not the Romans conceive of their period as a century of lights inherited from the Greeks? Dubos invoked Quintilian:

The latest inventions [the compass, the printing press, glasses...] spread a marvelous light on the knowledge that we already had. Luckily for our century, it finds itself at a time of maturity, when the progress of the natural sciences was at its fastest. The lights resulting from the preceding inventions, each of them having caused a separate advancement, began to combine eighty or a hundred years ago. We can say about our century what Quintilian said about his: ‘Antiquity has furnished us with so many

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 454–455. In the 1733 edition, Dubos modified the starting point: the century of lights started 80 years ago, in this edition, around 1650 or 1660. Perhaps Dubos had in mind the foundation of the royal academies in England and in France.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 458. “Il suffit qu’un siècle vienne après un autre pour raisonner mieux que lui dans les sciences naturelles, à moins qu’il ne soit arrivé dans la société un bouleversement assez grand pour éteindre, au préjudice des petits-fils, les lumières qu’avaient leurs ancêtres.”

materials, so many examples that one could not, it seems, be born in an era that is more favored than our own, since the preceding ages have worked towards its instruction.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, the very expression “century of lights” is at stake in this polemic. The possession of lights is the object of a veritable battle among the savants. The phrase is claimed by all sides to the point that its use becomes purely ideological: “Our savants, much like the ancient philosophers, do not agree about the facts, and they mutually refute one another concerning all that can only be known by way of reasoning, each treating the others as if they were voluntarily blind and refused to see the light. [...] Those who praise so strongly the lights that the mind has spread over our century might reply that they understand nothing else by ‘our century’ than themselves and their friends and that one must not consider all others who are not in agreement with them on all matters, such as the Ancients, to be philosophers.”<sup>43</sup> Dubos clearly conceptualized the ideological use that could be made of a notion such as “the century of lights,” when the phrase was claimed and deployed by those who categorically supported the absolute validity of their own philosophical position.

### III. The Public and Public Opinion

The debate concerning the meaning of the phrase “to be from one’s own century” thus took place during the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. It was not enough to know the extent to which an author might be able to escape his own age—to know if Homeric poetry was necessarily barbarous, to the point where the modern public could not help but be outraged by the coarseness and irrationality of the heroic ages. It was also necessary to justify the criterion of judgment that would establish the superiority of one’s own century.

Once again, Dubos provides invaluable assistance: his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* questions the claims and pretensions of reason in the domain of fine arts. Can the jurisdiction of reason extend beyond the science of nature and become the sole tribunal before which all the creations of the human mind must appear? Dubos categorically denied this. In the second part of the *Réflexions critiques*, he defended the idea according to which feeling (or sentiment) was the only appropriate judge for evaluating the merit of literary and artistic works. Section XII proposed two different adjudicators for assessing the productions of the human mind: professionals and “the public.” However, only the public could properly judge works according to their true worth, unless it were corrupted by the opinions of the critics. In artistic matters, the manifestation of the truth was hampered by the untimely use of critical reason that plunged the public into uncertain and made it founder in error, until sentiment finally managed to take back its rights.

And so, we might attempt the following hypothesis. The sense of what “an enlightened century” or “a century of lights” was took shape at the moment when a two-dimensional right of inventory emerged: on the one hand, it concerned the heritage of the Ancients, and, on the other hand, it dealt with the legitimate claims of reason to judge the works of another time period. By making sentiment the rightful criterion for evaluating beauty that moves and touches us and by

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 471–472.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 486–487.

rejecting the claims of critics to evaluate non-scientific works of genius, Dubos offered a new sense of the term “public” that helped to constitute an enlightened century with its judgments.<sup>44</sup> A public that was capable of appreciating the excellence of art was a public that would patronize artistic and literary productions and form a new kind of a public space.<sup>45</sup> It was limited in size, since the public was not the same thing as the people: “the word ‘public’ only included people who had already acquired lights, either by reading or by their experience in the world.” However, this audience could become more democratized with time, as literary and artistic works became diffused more widely: “the public in question here is confined to people who read, who are familiar with theatrical plays, who see and discuss paintings, or who have acquired, by whatever means, the discernment known as ‘the taste of comparison.’”<sup>46</sup> Following Longepierre, Dubos considered that the heart, enlightened by experiences, was the **true** organ of truth in aesthetic matters.

Finally, the lights invoked by Dubos can be understood as the refinement of artistic sensibility. The result is paradoxical: if the century of lights was not the age of reason or of the philosophical spirit, it took many lights to attain the ability to judge well and to constitute a lucid tribunal of opinion. The lights discharged for ideological use reappeared in practical form, associated with the experience necessary to evaluate the merit of artistic and literary productions. The tension thus reaches its highest point: it was by defending the Ancients that Dubos contributed to the invention of what constituted one of the words characteristic of modernity after 1750—that is to say, “public opinion,” established as the sovereign judge and tribunal capable of evaluating the aesthetic and political creations of the human mind.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Following Habermas, Ricuperati has unearthed the authors who have analyzed the legacy of the philosophical spirit after the death of Louis XIV, and he has described the eighteenth century as the moment of the emergence of public opinion.<sup>48</sup> However, critical reflections concerning the beneficial and harmful effects of the philosophical spirit appeared before the birth of the historiography of the Enlightenment and before the emergence of theories about the relationship between the philosophes and the French Revolution. The aim of this essay has been to show that the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns had posed this question in an unprecedented way and to highlight the role that the abbé Dubos played in the emergence of reflections about “the century

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> For more on this topic, see Fabienne Brugère, *Le goût. Art, passions et société* (Paris: P.U.F., 2000), 22–30.

<sup>46</sup> Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, v.2, 335.

<sup>47</sup> I only cite the major studies on the theme of public opinion that has created a new interpretive approach to eighteenth-century studies: Jürgen Habermas, *L'espace public. Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, trans. Marc Buhot de Launay (Paris: Payot, 1978); Roger Chartier, *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), chap. 2: “Espace public et opinion publique”; Keith Michael Baker, “Politique et opinion publique sous l’Ancien Régime,” *Annales ESC* (1987): 41–71; Mona Ozouf, “Le concept d’opinion publique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *L’Homme régénéré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 21–53; Arlette Farge, *Dire et mal dire. L’opinion publique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Hélène Merlin-Kajman, *Public et littérature en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994). Merlin-Kajman has notably insisted on the emergence of public opinion in the sphere literary (rather than political) debates.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example Ernest Lerminier, *De l’influence de la philosophie du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle sur la législation et la sociabilité du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Prévost-Didier, 1833); Désiré Nisard, *Histoire de la littérature française*, 16<sup>e</sup> éd. (Paris: Didot, 1889); Ernest Bersot, *Études sur le dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, Durand, 1855).

of lights.” Even if he had witnessed a social and cultural evolution of a greater scale, Dubos remained pioneer. His reflections on the ambivalent nature of the philosophical spirit brought together analyses of the social, political, and cultural conditions that produced a learned elite. His examination of “the public” revealed the important attention paid to the role of feeling and sentiment in the creation of the Enlightenment.

Far from seeking to defend the Ancients, in the manner of Marc Fumaroli or Larry Norman, this essay has tried to reestablish the origins of historical self-reflexivity. The emergence of the concept of public opinion—a process that occurred before the appearance of the actual phrase in the 1750s—remains to be studied. Casting off the tutelage of traditional authorities, the public became the only sovereign authority for judging the merits of the creations of the human mind. It did so by daring to use not only its own understanding but also its own feelings.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> In response to the Habermasian archeology, Joan Dejean brings up the origin of this new public space with the appearance of the *Mercur galant*, the most influential periodical on the French literary scene between 1672 and 1710. She discusses the strategy of its editor, Jean Donneau de Visé, who encouraged his readers to send the journal collective letters that offered testimonies of their personal opinions. This was especially the case with the publication of *La Princesse de Clèves* in 1678. See Dejean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 57–65.