

Il tema

THE CLASSICAL ROOTS
OF TOLAND'S THOUGHT

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1.

A good starting point for the discussion about the importance of the classical sources for the development of Toland's thought can be found in the text of an Irish writer, who took an important part in the debate about the respective worth of ancient of modern learning. I am referring to the famous *Battle of the Books* by Jonathan Swift (1704), one of the most passionate defences of the classical heritage against the supporters of the "advancement of learning". Before the description of the epical fight which takes place in the rooms of the Royal Library (directed, by the way, by Richard Bentley, the classical scholar and "Newtonian" theologian, a prominent figure in the army of the moderns) the author puts on the stage a curious dialogue, whose characters are two typical Baconian animals, a spider and a bee. But here the original meaning of Bacon's metaphor is reversed: Swift chooses to identify the bee with the symbol of ancient, instead of modern, learning.

I am obliged to Heaven alone for my flights and my music. ... I visit indeed all the flowers and blossoms in the field and garden; but whatever I collect thence, enriches myself, without the least injury to their beauty, their smell, or their taste¹.

The spider, on the other hand, in spite of his acknowledged skill "in architecture and other mathematics" and the show of "labour and method", is confined in the dusty corners of the library and

uses unsubstantial materials, unable to survive the assaults of time. The confrontation between the two animals ends with a rhetorical question:

Whether is the nobler being of the two, that which, by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeling and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom; or that which, by an universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax².

As the following intervention of Aesop himself makes clear, Swift's obvious intention is to retort against his opponents the kind of criticism usually directed towards the limitations of ancient learning: its narrow perspective, its pride and pretences of self-sufficiency, its barrenness and distance from the "real world" of things. It was not just another paradox springing from the pen of the sharpest satirist of his age. As the development of the real "battle" shows, a number of serious scholars, like William Temple, shared the belief that to despise the heritage of the ancients meant to leave the world of experience for a chimerical and ephemeral one, where the extension and depth of the classical frame of mind were substituted by a self-confinement to the narrow sphere of technical achievements and practical interests³.

Looking from a retrospective point of view, the outcome of the battle does not look as uncertain as Swift left it, in spite of his marked preference for the party of the ancients. The beginning of the Age of Reason is traditionally associated with a growing faith in progress as an essential feature of civilization, depending not only on particular historical circumstances, but on the natural faculties and drives of human mind. Even if every nation may be subject to a cyclical process of development, climax and decadence, it did not seem difficult to show "how the world has gone on from Age to Age, Improving; and consequently, that it is at present much more Knowing than it ever was since the earliest Times to which History can carry us"⁴.

A closer examination, however, shows that the appreciation of

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the wider knowledge and experience of the moderns goes along, at least until the first decades of the eighteenth century, with a lively interest in the world of "venerable Antiquities" and of classical culture, seen as a perennial repository of moral, political and theoretical examples, if not as the source of the deepest religious and philosophical wisdom. In fact, the discussion about the role of Hermetic or Neoplatonic patterns of interpretation of the origin and development of Western culture in the early modern age has been one of the most typical points of the historiographical debate during the last decades of our century⁵. So, from a certain point of view, the "Battle of the Books" has found an unexpected continuation in our time, when we can observe a similar coincidence of the development of critical attitudes towards the notion of scientific and technological progress, with the revival of a view of philosophical enquiry as the perennial reinterpretation of an all-embracing tradition.

The confrontation between the extreme historiographical lines of interpretation, which put a stress either on the continuity or on the critical attitude towards classical models, has often neglected some important aspects of the modern frame of mind. Rather than simply rejecting or accepting the heritage of ancient traditions, most authors belonging to the "age of crisis" of European consciousness, between the end of the seventeenth and the first decades of the eighteenth century, shared complex attitudes towards antiquity. The main problem seemed not to be the evaluation of classical culture as a whole, but the revival or the criticism of aspects and traditions which looked more or less akin to contemporary discussions and interests. The opposition to the most influential traditions in the history of Western thought, for instance, often induced to look at the most remote expressions of ancient learning as the authentic sources of metaphysical, scientific and theological speculation, unrestrained by prejudices or religious censure. This persuasion was widely spread among seventeenth-century writers (including Francis Bacon) and often suggested, during a long age of civil and religious struggles, a method for criticizing the present corruption, by contrasting it with the models of political and intellectual life offered by the ancient authors.

Toland's work is a perfect example of this double-faced attitude towards antiquity: his claim to independence from intellectual authorities goes along with a lasting interest in the remote sources of philosophy and religion, seen as the evidences of a view of natural and human world free from prejudices and interest. In the light of the foregoing observations, it is worth while to discuss once again the problem of Toland's classical sources: as a matter of fact, the answers to this question have often been used only as standards to evaluate the degree of "modernity" of his scientific and philosophical doctrines. Some years ago I happened to join in this discussion and, although I still cannot see Toland as a pioneer of the most advanced scientific achievements of his time, I think that now the statement of the problem in these terms has lost much of its interest. If we look for an explanation of his ambiguous attitude towards ancient and modern learning, I think it must be a kind of explanation corresponding to the mentality of his age, rather than to our historical standards. One of the main reasons which explain the persisting interest in Toland's work is, in my opinion, his personal and (of course) heterodox interpretation of historiographical and theoretical models deeply involved in the emerging of the modern world. I am persuaded, therefore, that the understanding of this central feature of his thought may also contribute to a more complete assessment of the role of the Irish freethinker in the context of European thought.

2.

The most explicit appreciation of a "progressive" view of human culture in Toland's works can be found in *Christianity not Myste- rious*, where he explicitly refers to the arguments used by Perrault and Fontenelle, in order to confirm the superiority of modern learning. He stresses, in particular, the classical comparison between the ages of human life and the stages of civilization, which allowed Perrault to say that "such as lived before us were the Children or Youth, and we are the true Antients of the World"⁶. *Chris- tianity not Myste- rious* is also the only work where Toland chooses

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as his main philosophical model the work of a living thinker, adopting Locke's epistemological criteria in order to show the inconsistency of the current notion of mystery as a truth "above reason" (Locke is defined elsewhere as "the first philosopher in the world after Cicero")⁷. At the same time, he relies heavily on contemporary sources (especially Jean Leclerc and Anthony Van Dale) for his interpretation of the historical and symbolical meaning of mysteries and of Heathen rites.

Since the first stages of Toland's thought, however, we can observe a marked interest towards the rediscovery of the "original forms" of religion and learning, witnessed not only by his inquiries on the sources of genuine Christianity, but also by his researches on linguistic and etymological subjects connected to his cultural background⁸. Moreover, while he shows the historical deformations suffered by ancient texts and traditions, he also insists on the aspects of continuity between Heathen and Christian worships and practices and on the persistence of Greek philosophical traditions in the development of early Christian doctrines. These aspects can be obviously related to the radical criticism of the corruptions of Scriptural teaching since the age of the Fathers, worked out by the extreme Protestant sects, especially the Socinians. But it is important to observe that Toland does not condemn the traditions of classical philosophy as such, but only the sophisticated and over-refined speculations of late Hellenistic thinkers, often associated to mystery worship and symbolical rites, which were transfused into the substance of Christian learning and practices. So his interpretation, in fact, leaves open the question about the (possible) philosophical origins of "mysteries", a recurring theme in Toland's later works. The reflections about the separation between the learned (or initiated) and the "vulgar", as well as the definition of mystery itself – "a thing intelligible of it self, but so vail'd by others, that it could not be known without special Revelation"⁹ –, look, however, like meaningful hints to the interpretation of religious doctrines and rites as expressions of a concealed philosophical truth – the belief which supports Toland's view of a substantial continuity of philosophical traditions through the ages.

This position is clearly stated in the second *Letter to Serena*, which exposes for the first time a general interpretation of the sources and development of ancient cultures. After the first Ionic philosophers, the history of Greek thought coincides with the progressive removal from the objective inquiry into the nature of things. Anaxagoras (read through Aristotle, Diogenes Laertius, and Bayle) introduces for the first time a spiritualistic principle of the universe – the “Mind” – which betrays the influence of “popular” religious beliefs and offers the first known example of a partial subordination of philosophy to theology in the history of Western thought. In order to understand the meaning of this process, it is necessary not only to oppose the “exoterical” and “esoterical” contents of spiritualistic philosophies, but also to analyze their distinction as the result of a compromise between scientific attitudes and political needs. The current interpretations of Pythagoric and Platonic doctrines about the immortality of the soul offer the most remarkable examples of “double philosophy”, which avoided to clash with popular beliefs, without being completely absorbed, however, by religious institutions and doctrines. But the situation became still worse after the diffusion of Christianity, when the conception of a separated soul and the superstitious beliefs assumed the status of dogmas, supported by a supreme religious authority, and when philosophy seemed to loose any intellectual independence, being denied any “liberty of Conscience and free Speech”¹⁰.

But the tradition of true philosophy, whose roots can be traced to the Egyptian culture (the first among the great civilizations of antiquity, as far as the known sources can tell), survives through the ages, adapting itself to different needs and cultural contexts; it re-emerges to the light in favourable contexts, as the Roman Republic and the English Commonwealth (or maybe in the “Commonwealth of Moses”); it can still be used as a weapon against the recurring temptations to restrict the rights of freethinking and to press an uniformity of opinions. The providential view of the universe, composed by “passive matter” and directed by a personal Deity, works in every age as a metaphor of political and intellectual control over the understandings and consciences of individuals;

it strengthens man's perpetual need of an external protection, and his feeling of dependence from unknowable powers, which prevents him to see himself as a part of an harmonious and self-sustaining cosmos.

3.

This point of view does not seem to undergo any substantial change in the following works, where Toland, from different perspectives, deals with various topics related to sacred and profane history: the political role of religious imposture and popular superstitions in the development of the Roman state (*Adeisidaemon*); the confrontation between the Biblical version of the origins and development of the Jewish nation, and the ancient profane sources, especially Strabo and Diodorus of Sicily (*Origines Judaicae*); the discovery of a "new" Gospel written by the first converted Jews and accepted as a holy text by the modern Muslims, and the proposal of the "Nazaren System" as the possible basis for a reconciliation among the three monotheistical religions (*Nazarenus*). The same attitude inspires, of course, the works especially devoted to the tradition of ancient esoteric philosophies (*Cliodophorus*), and to the illustration of a world-view which takes its main inspiration from the ancient philosophers and poets celebrating the Soul of the world and the universal activity of matter, from pseudo-Democritus to Manilius (*Pantheisticon*).

This double line of research, by the way, is the symptom of an everlasting tension in Toland's thought: on the one hand, the temptation to absorb even the Jewish and Christian traditions in the wide stream of the "perennial philosophy"; on the other hand, the impulse towards a more direct connection with the heathen philosophers, who despised the superstitious fears and attacked the theological explanations of the world. The latter are, of course, the ideal partners for a "Sodalitas Socratica", which overcomes any geographical and historical, as well as social, bonds. But as the consciousness of an enlightened minority cannot overcome the passions of "the mob" instigated by a corrupted clergy, the only way

for the growth of intellectual freedom seems to be a project of “Union without Uniformity” among different religious sects, which cuts down the harmful effects of fanaticism and superstition¹¹.

The widening range of the references to ancient authors in Toland's writings is itself a clue to the evolution of his thought. In addition to the recurring quotations from his highest philosophical and stylistical models (Cicero in the first place, but also Seneca, Lucretius, Vergil, Plinius the elder) and to his favourite historical sources (Diogenes Laertius, Diodorus, Herodotus, Plutarch and so on), the works of his ripe years are often centered around a particular author or tradition, which offers the occasion for discussing a more general – theoretical and historical – subject. The choice of the former, however, does not usually look like a pretext (as it happened during the Battle of the Books, in the case of the discussions about the authorship of the *Letter of Phalaris* or of Aesop's fables); it rather reveals a long familiarity with the texts and a particular sympathy with the writer.

Let us take, for instance, Toland's “defence of Titus Livy” against the charges of superstition formulated by Christian authors. The debate around this particular topic lies in the background of the intense critical work, testified by the several editions of Livy's *History of Rome* since the last decades of the sixteenth century. Scholars like the Jesuit Antonio Possevino and Justus Lipsius, followed by J. G. Voss, showed a substantial agreement in the critical judgment upon Livy's acquiescence to the superstitions of his country, and such attitudes found echoes in the more recent works by Leclerc and Bayle, two of Toland's favourite contemporary sources (in spite of their mutual rivalry)¹². But the importance of the subject goes much beyond the discussion about Livy's reliability and the value of his tales about supposed miracles and extraordinary phenomena, which nurtured the devotion of the Roman people. Some critics – especially Gerard Johann Voss – had tried to “excuse” Livy's supposed credulity by resorting to the argument that any kind of superstition was better than downright atheism (this very assertion was one of the main targets of Bayle's *Pensées*

sur la comète)¹³. Toland, who seems to have started very early his reflections concerning the Roman historian – in fact, following his report in *Adeisidaemon*, many passages of Livy's works had been imprinted on his memory since the age of fifteen – not only reacts with an apology of his author, but takes the hint as the starting point for a passionate attack against “immanis illa et dira Superstitio” (the enormous and evil superstition), considered “much more ruinous to the Commonwealth and to human society” than atheism itself¹⁴. The chronicler of heathen prodigies is the exact counterpart of the critic of Christian mysteries: it is not the description of superstitious beliefs as such, but the more or less direct ways of suggesting the interpretation of “supernatural” events as popular delusions and political forgeries, which give the real clue to understand Livy as an unsurpassed example for the “philosophical historians” of all ages.

While agreeing with Bayle in the evaluation of the moral and social effects of superstition and atheism, Toland corrects the judgment of the former about Livy's superstitious character and adopts a more complex (and even ambiguous) view of the more general problems involved in the debate. In this case too, the influence of the classical model seems to overcome his nearer terms of reference. Even if much more dangerous than atheism, superstition must be tolerated as a means of social cohesion, when people cannot bear the responsibility of their intellectual and moral freedom and need to be directed (as was the case in the age of the kings of Rome or in the birth of the Jewish nation, grown from a “mixed people” of slaves). Only a gradual development of their power of self-decision, the diffusion of learning and the widening of intellectual perspectives can offer the conditions to check this “impious Humour of God-making”¹⁵.

4.

The conclusion of Toland's performance as “Adeisidaemon” points out not only the tight connections between historical and theoretical problems, but also the perception of direct correspon-

dences between the present situation and the examples and patterns of behaviour handed down in the writings of classical authors. The recourse to the tools of philological and exegetical learning – for Toland, and for many of his contemporaries as well – is not only a tactical device to disguise radical ideas under the shape of “innocent Researches in venerable Antiquities”: it shows his awareness of an immediate continuity with the beliefs, needs and hopes of his intellectual ancestors. In opposition to this attitude towards Greek and Latin models, the references to other kind of ancient sources – especially the Fathers of the Church – are more and more restricted to particular exigences and to occasional purposes. In *Adeisidaemon*, for instance, the long digression about the supposed destruction of classical texts and monuments by zealous Christians is particularly directed against the author of the most important reform of the Church during the early Middle Ages, Pope Gregory the Great. In this case, Toland resorts to ecclesiastical historians, like John of Salisbury, and to Gregory's letters in order to show the systematic effort to erase the remains of heathen culture and to foster an attitude of devout ignorance, as the mark of the authority of the Roman Church over individual consciences and understandings¹⁶. If we compare such reflections with the position expressed in *Christianity not Mysteriorious*, the difference is easy to appreciate: the corruption of early Christianity is no longer ascribed to the blending with heathen doctrines and practices, but to the intolerance and hatred of the religious authority towards the traditions inherited from the classical world, seen as symbols of human pride and of attachment to worldly interests.

The most explicit rejection not only of Patristic teaching and Church traditions, but also of the reliability of early Christian sources about historical and theological matters, however, is contained in *Nazarenus*. Though Toland cannot afford to neglect the only available sources about the first Christian communities and sects, he never misses any occasion to stress the contradictions, partiality and ignorance of such authors: Epiphanius in the first place – “the bungling and confus'd Epiphanius”¹⁷ –, followed by Irenaeus and Jerom. He seems to feel more respect for figures like

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Justin the Martyr and Augustin. The intellectual and moral qualities of the latter emerge especially in the debate with Jerom about the right of converted Jews to keep faithful to the laws of Moses: but after all "Augustin was a bishop, and wished to remain such". He had no courage to oppose the current interpretations of Paul's teaching about Levitical law and gave up his opinion "to the overbearing weight of the majority"¹⁸.

The only exceptions to the severe judgment upon the "forgeries" and false interpretations which corrupted the sources of Christianity since its beginning are, of course, the first "heretical" sects, trying to keep alive the civil traditions and customs of their people, while accepting the new message of peace and brotherhood diffused by Christ. It is interesting to observe the comparison between the Nazarens, or Ebionites, and the modern Socinians, who insisted on the importance of accepting the literal meaning of Scripture, while allowing a complete tolerance for the interpretations and practices of different religious communities¹⁹. On the other hand, we can see a significant difference from Spinoza (the main reference for Toland's model of the Jewish theocracy), who excluded the historical possibility of a recovery of the Jewish people and the utility of their present attachment to the Mosaic law. On the contrary, Toland – whose interest for the destiny of the Jewish people is well attested – insists on the principle that every community must keep faithful to their peculiar laws and institutions, without forcing other nations to respect any of them, but only the universal "Noachian" precepts, coinciding with the law of Reason²⁰. Even if probably determined by political, more than ideal, reasons, Toland's solution comes very near to the most effective – and modern – idea of tolerance as the full acceptance, rather than the attempt to mitigate, the differences in the beliefs and practices of individuals and nations, as far as they are willing to accept common rules of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. This is the reason why *Nazarenus* seems to me Toland's most elaborate effort to conciliate the "abstract" view of natural law often imputed to the Deists with the acknowledgment of the historical roots of the identity and unity of every people. Once again, the meaning of

“progress”, even if restricted to a political and civil meaning, is associated to the development of long-standing traditions, rather than to radical breaks or to the disowning of the past. As for the philosophers, the situation of course is different, since truth cannot be but one, however disguised in myths and mysteries: the opening of “new scenes of thought” (to use Hume’s favourite expression) looks as unconceivable as the emergence of unpredictable or casual breaks in the perpetual rhythm of the universe. The “double doctrine” theory offers, in any case, a way to bring back to an uninterrupted line of thinking even the views which seem to give no support to a materialistic philosophy of nature: so that even theologians like Gregory of Rimini and the vituperated Jerom can sometimes be quoted among the sources of pantheistic philosophy. The only position which Toland thinks completely impossible to subject to the “esoteric” kind of interpretation is, curiously enough, the Epicurean doctrine which ascribes the origins of universe to “chance”, since it seems to exclude the possibility itself of a rational explanation of the world²¹.

5.

But what about Toland’s uninterrupted dialogue with the “moderns”? The author who saw as his main task the demolition of errors and prejudices, without regard of “Times, Places, or Circumstances”, could not avoid a confrontation with the recent results of philosophical, scientific and scholarly research. As it is well known, one of the main reasons of the importance of Toland’s work is his European dimension and the number of his intellectual relations with the most prominent characters in the cultural world of his age: Locke, Leibniz, Bayle, Leclerc, the “Newtonians”. The point is that, after *Christianity not Mystrious*, Toland usually refers to such authors in a critical way, however important they may be considered as terms of comparison. Even when he quotes his favourite authors among the “moderns” – Bruno, Berigard, Bayle – and a few more historians and scholars, like Marsham, Spencer, Leclerc, Woodward – Toland doesn’t look at their works as primary sources

of inspiration: he rather appears to be looking for a confirmation and extension of consolidated beliefs²². Sometimes he just picks up particular hints or themes which appear functional to his ends (as in the case of Descartes and of Newton himself); more often he uses some prominent characters of contemporary culture as polemical targets (which never happens in the case of his heathen sources). He treats no ancient writer, for instance, with the same contempt as Huet: a typical champion of modern learning at the service of piety, a hunter of fancy etymologies and mythical genealogies in order to fake the true evidences about Moses' political ends and pantheistic philosophy, luckily preserved in the writings of Strabo and Diodorus of Sicily²³.

On the other hand, Toland shows his disappointment, rather than enthusiasm, even towards Spinoza, Bayle's "moral atheist", the perfect example of modern freethinker and freespeaker, who made his system "precarious" by forgetting to mention activity among the essential attributes of eternal substance²⁴. In my opinion, this judgment is not a devious contrivance to hide an obvious sympathy towards Spinoza's metaphysics: rather, it is a simple but decisive proof of the lesser value Toland attributed to the achievements of the modern thinkers compared with the ancient giants. Why look for new versions of truths about nature and man, which have been known since the first stages of rational enquiry and are expressed, moreover, in unsurpassed patterns of stylistical and linguistic perfection? Why prefer the "esoteric" interpretation of Newton's absolute space to the Pythagoric myth of transmigrating souls or to Bruno's poetical description of an infinite and animated universe? As far as I know, there is no answer to such questions in Toland's works: I just wonder if this kind of questions would make any sense to him. There seems to be no difference between "old" and "new" sources, but in their capacity to produce a fuller understanding of the real nature of things: and, as a matter of fact, the most complete and exact conceptions of the world can usually be found in the works of classical, rather than modern, writers.

There is no reason either of complaining for Toland's attachment to the past, or of trying to enlist him as a (more or less) unconscious

leader in the army of the moderns. After all, Newton himself saw in his own scientific achievements the recovery of the lost Mosaic or Pythagoric wisdom, without feeling obliged for that to give up the claims to priority in his discoveries. What has been the spontaneous gift of an unbiassed inquiry and an enlightened mind can easily be lost in the tangle of political interests and religious struggles: from Toland's point of view, in fact, the history of thought is, for the most part, a history of decadence of learning and concealment of philosophical truth. So every age would be compelled to a new discovery and "republication" of truth, if the classical models – which the Christian civilization has tried in vain to erase out, as in the case of Livy – did not show the way and point out its destination for anyone who is willing to listen to their everlasting lessons.

Does all that mean either that Toland gives in fact little importance to contemporary research and accepts the idea of a necessary decadence of learning, or that he refuses *a priori* the possibility of intellectual and scientific progress? Toland gives only few examples of new discoveries which are not reformulations of ancient truths (as in the case of the Copernican theory). But he has a reason to give for that: when he refers, for instance, to the studies of Flamsteed and Cassini about the motions of comets, as a confirmation of the fact that they are not special signs of heaven, he also stresses that the philosopher "who has no leisure for astronomy" is always certain, even without such scientific proofs, that no phenomenon of the heavenly world can be an exception to the necessary laws of nature²⁵.

Here again, it is particularly important to find the right key of interpretation: the essential point is not the choice between ancients and moderns, but rather the conception of the development of thought as a series of variations on recurring themes. Following the example of Bayle, Toland (with a crowd of philosophers of his age) acknowledges that the range of theoretical alternatives is limited: in addition to Plato and Aristotle, the models of Zeno and Phyrro, Strato and Epicurus exhaust any possible solution. The development of sciences and the turn of theological debates contribute to

put some questions in different terms, or to expound unforeseen aspects and details of the world-view. But the possibility itself of radical transformations or innovations in the history of thought is excluded from Toland's perspective, since the directions of sound reason offer in every age and culture the essential clue to the understanding of the life and unity of the cosmos, and of man's place in its perpetual "revolution". This sort of indetermination with respect to our historical and conceptual standards cannot help puzzling any contemporary reader. Such a situation is, however, the logical outcome of a critical point of transition in the European frame of mind. The idea of *prisca philosophia* as the source and standard of universal learning is gradually transformed in the "deistical" conception of truth as the spontaneous fruit of every culture which allows freedom of thinking and expression. But as the renewal and diffusion of such knowledge is not granted, the traditions which expressed it and their correct interpretations have to be kept alive during the dark ages in the civil and intellectual history of nations, by a careful protection and a continuous discussion of the theoretical heritage of ancient wisdom. This is, without doubt, one of the prevailing interests in Toland's late production, as we can observe in the essay about the tradition of esoteric philosophies, as well as in the philosophical catechism of the "Sodalitas Socratica".

I left purposely out of the foregoing considerations the most enigmatical among Toland's works, where the defence of "pantheistic" wisdom is carried on under the flag of the ancients and the formulary of the philosophical liturgy is a mosaic of quotations from Cicero, Horace and Cato the elder. *Pantheisticon* is, for good reasons, the work which has mostly drawn the attention of scholars during the last decades: the difficulty of its interpretation lies in the correct understanding, not only of the natural philosophy of the "Sodalitas Socratica" – a complex form of "atomistic vitalism" – but also of the grounds for the choice of its classical frame and style. Let us try, as a conclusion, to point out some of these grounds. The first reason is, of course, that the reference to the tradition of intellectual *convivia*, whose origins can be brought back

to the Greek and Latin models, allows a detachment from everyday experience which is the first condition for coming out of the “mob” and escaping the tyranny of custom²⁶. The second reason is also easy to grasp: since explaining nature is different from teaching a religion, the stylistical pattern of discussion of the Pantheistic doctrines must be borrowed from a culture which keeps philosophical speculation distinct from the interests of theology²⁷. But the most important and explicit reason is the direct appeal of the modern Pantheists, from the very beginning of the text, to the remote sources of a “hidden wisdom”, embodied in mythical characters like Linus and Musaeus. Their teaching contains the fundamental tenet of any true philosophy – the vision of nature as an organic whole, where the “divine” principle of activity is “all in all” –, while other ancient traditions enlighten the details of this worldview: the conception of thought as a product of the “ethereal fire” in the brain (Hippocrates, Pseudo-Democritus), the motions of the Earth (the Egyptian astronomers, Aristarchus, Eudoxos etc.), or the doctrine of the organic growth of all kinds of bodies from their “composed seeds” (Anaxagoras). The new version of a classical doctrine – as the theory of animal spirits, for instance – can be accepted only if it is able to preserve the original meaning of the doctrine: that is, without eliminating any of the essential qualifications of the spirits, especially for what concerns the action of the “ethereal fire”²⁸.

Apart from the ambiguous reference to Newton, in relation to the problem of the existence of a void – a concept expressly refused by Toland in the preceding pages –, the only contemporary “scientist” openly praised in *Pantheisticon* is William Woodward, for his contributions to the demonstration of the organic origin of fossils²⁹. Such acknowledgement shows, however, the satisfaction for the confirmation of the belief in the cyclical revolutions of the Universe, rather than the awareness of a new “historical” approach to the study of nature. There is no discussion about the “catastrophical” views of the natural history of the world (shared by Woodward as well as by Burnet and Whiston), with the exception of a polemical reference to the “poetical” fictions of the universal deluge,

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commonly used, until the age of Boulanger and D'Holbach, in order to explain the devastated condition of the primeval Earth. The proofs given by scientific research, in short, are welcome as far as they fit in a pre-existing frame of explanation: the interest of Toland's doctrines, I think, consists in the definition of this conceptual frame, rather than in the search for experimental confirmations offered by the developments of science.

One of the most beautiful engravings in Toland's "esoterical" work gives a bright example of this turn of mind³⁰. A gentleman in a eighteenth-century suit is sitting by an ancient temple plunged in a rich vegetation, holding a drawing block in his hands. He does neither wear a neoclassical disguise, nor look like a romantic traveller among ruins showing the devastating effects of time. The awareness of chronological distance does not prevent the perception of a substantial harmony between the temple and its natural background, and the effort to imitate such perfection. This picture can be seen, in my opinion, as the symbolic representation of the main ideal and political message of *Pantheisticon*: a complex effort to substitute the Arcadic illusions, or the flights to chimerical utopias, with a symbolic reconciliation between history and nature. So, at the end of his intellectual career, Toland seems to express the persuasion that the modern worshipper of antiquity – the industrious bee of Swift's apologue – flying back and forth between two different worlds, can get the best part of both.

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NOTES

- 1 SWIFT 1704, p. 170.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 See LEVINE 1991 and 1995, pp. 220-221. With reference to Lovejoy 1948, Levine asserts that the party of the "ancients" often coincided with deists and free-thinkers, rather than with the "modern" defenders of orthodoxy.
- 4 WOTTON 1694, p. IV; quoted in LEVINE 1995, p. 222. For an exposition of the typical arguments of the "moderns" on behalf of progress, see FOSTER-JONES 1936, SPADAFORA 1990, ROSSI 1995.
- 5 For the debate about the persistence of the model of *prisca philosophia* in modern culture, the classical references are YATES 1964, WALKER 1972, WESTMAN-MCGUIRE 1977, SCHMITT 1981.
- 6 TOLAND 1696, pp. 116-117.
- 7 For the judgment about Locke, see TOLAND 1698 (1932), p. 83.
- 8 Toland's interest towards the ancient Celtic culture and language is witnessed in TOLAND 1726, I, pp. 137-140, II, pp. 293-294. See also HARRISON 1997.
- 9 TOLAND 1696, p. 72.
- 10 TOLAND 1704, Letter III, pp. 127-129; see also TOLAND 1698, p. 133-140.
- 11 For references to the project of "Union without Uniformity", see TOLAND 1718, pp.V, 40-48; also TOLAND 1932, pp. 137-140, 167.
- 12 For the discussion about Livy and superstition, see, for instance, VOSS 1651, I, p. 94; BAYLE 1683, I, ch. V; LECLERC 1710, I, notes pp. 132, 193, and especially III, p. 65, note to LXII, 2 ("Ex hoc loco excusari potest frequens prodigiorum commemoratio, quae apud Livium occurrit; ne quis eum omnia credidisse putet, quae narrat").
- 13 TOLAND 1709a, pp. 67-68.
- 14 TOLAND 1709a, p. 68.
- 15 TOLAND 1704, Letter III, p. 98.
- 16 TOLAND 1709a, pp. 79-90.

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- 17 TOLAND 1718, p. 52.
- 18 TOLAND 1718, pp. 57-59.
- 19 TOLAND 1718, pp. 16-17, 28. Other historians, especially Humphrey Prideaux, stressed the analogy between some beliefs of the Muslims and the Socinian doctrines; see PRIDEAUX 1698, p. 20, RELAND 1721, pp. 253-254.
- 20 TOLAND 1718, pp. 38-51. Even the strangers living in the "Mosaic Republic" were only bound by the prohibition of offering sacrifices to idols and of eating blood (pp. 44-50). See also TOLAND 1714 and intr. to the French translation, 1998, pp. 90-94.
- 21 TOLAND 1720, pp. 144-146.
- 22 See SULLIVAN 1982, pp. 190-204.
- 23 TOLAND 1709b, pp. 104-119, 192-199.
- 24 TOLAND 1704, Letter IV, pp. 137-156; see also LURBE 1990, pp. 40-46.
- 25 TOLAND 1709a, pp. 60-63.
- 26 TOLAND 1720, p. 130-132 (To the Reader).
- 27 TOLAND 1720, p. 134.
- 28 TOLAND 1720, pp. 160-162.
- 29 TOLAND 1720, pp. 196-198. For references to Newton, see pp. 152-156.
- 30 TOLAND 1720, p. 228. See Cherchi 1991, pp. 22-23.