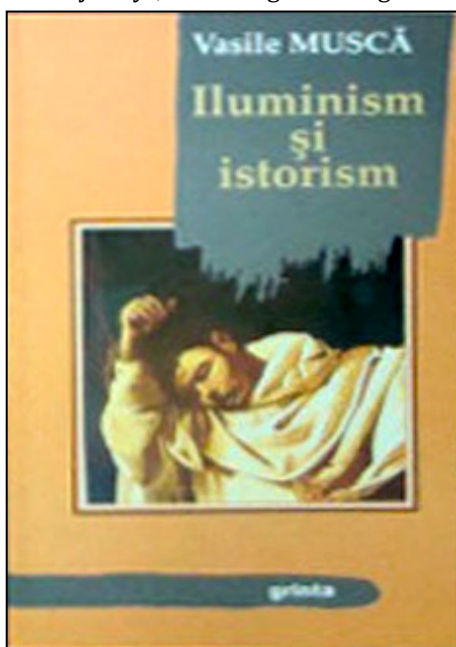


BOOKS

**Vasile Muscă, *Iluminism și istorism* [Enlightenment and Historicism].
Cluj-Napoca: Grinta, 2008, 191 p.**

“What is the Enlightenment?” is one of the most significant questions ever asked, a question that, in many ways, has shaped the world we live in. Either blaming or celebrating the movement, the answers to this question have attempted to contribute to the understanding of the modern world for more than two centuries now. The question started to infiltrate the European political and philosophical thought in the seventeenth century¹, although it received full articulation only in the late eighteenth century, when it engendered a spirited discussion about what had already been perceived as a decisive shift in Europe’s sense of itself.



¹ I am thinking of philosophers such as Francis Bacon, Sir Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, John Locke, or, to move on the continent, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Benedict Spinoza or Gottfried Leibniz, whose approaches to God, nature, reason, science, man, and contributions to the understanding of universe had already started to build the intellectual scaffold that would later support the attitudes, arguments, and practices of the Enlightenment.

The late eighteenth-century debates on the changes brought about by the enlightened age stem from German soil and are notoriously associated with *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, the magazine that launched the challenging invitation of answering the question “What is Enlightenment?” in 1784. The question then produced two of the movement’s best known descriptions, by Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant respectively, the latter being influenced by David Hume and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although Kant’s essay “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” has arguably remained the most prominent and influential, the last decades of the eighteenth century benefited from the contributions of several other thinkers² who

² See, for instance, Johann Karl Möhsen’s “What Is to Be Done toward the Enlightenment of the Citizenry?” (1783), Karl Leonhard Reinhold’s “Thoughts on Enlightenment” (1784), Ernst Ferdinand Klein’s “On Freedom of Thought and of the Press: For Princes, Ministers, and Writers” (1784), Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s “Reclama-

insisted on aspects that would become the tenets of the Enlightenment, namely the public use of reason, freedom of thought and expression, education, progress, the distinctive engagement with religion and faith, political awareness and revolutionary drives, all of them meant to improve the human condition.

The discussion on the Enlightenment has not yet been exhausted. The twentieth century has reopened it with a view to understanding how the heritage of the Enlightenment has shaped the contemporary world. Most intriguing theses were thus produced, many of which come from the same tradition of German philosophy that had initially configured the debates around this movement³. However, this does not mean that the geography of the critical approaches to the Enlightenment should be reduced to the German space; on the contrary, the exploration of the Enlightenment and of the ways in which it has shaped the contemporary world seems to have extended its scope through contributions coming from many cultural spaces and deriving from the most challenging standpoints⁴. Therefore, the question “what is Enlightenment?” seems to have remained just as topical as it used to be for Kant and his contemporaries. It is to the understanding of the complexity of the discussions around this movement that Vasile Muscă’s book

tion of the Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe, Who Have Oppressed It until Now” (1793).

³ See, for example, the works of Ernst Alfred Cassirer, Rüdiger Bittner, Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, or Jürgen Habermas.

⁴ See Michel Foucault’s famous engagement with the Kantian approach to the Enlightenment. For more recent contributions to the topic see “What is Enlightenment? Gayatri Spivak Conversing with Jane Gallop”, Robin May Schott’s readings of Kant’s philosophy through the lens of gender, or Jane Kneller’s criticism of Kant.

Iluminism și Istorism (Enlightenment and Historicism) is meant to contribute.

As professor at the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeș-Bolyai University, Vasile Muscă has always been interested in the philosophy of history, the history of philosophy, and the philosophy of culture. With the many books and hundreds of articles he has authored throughout his career, he has brought important contributions to the understanding of Ancient Greek philosophy, Enlightenment philosophy, and German idealism⁵, without, however, neglecting to explore the Romanian philosophical mindset, not only as shaped by the philosophers but also as reworked in Romanian literature⁶. The book under review, *Iluminism și Istorism (Enlightenment and Historicism)*, very well reflects Vasile Muscă’s main scholarly interests, as it explores the Enlightenment from a historicist perspective. The volume starts with the waning of the influences of Greek philosophy and its replacement by the Christian doctrine, moves on to explore the Enlightenment as a philosophical phenomenon, and ends with the analysis of two Romanian contributions to the interpretation of the role of the Renaissance in the formation of the modern world.

The first sections of *Iluminism și Istorism (Enlightenment and Historicism)* read like lectures delivered on specific occasions. For instance, the first essay in the book is based on a lecture given at a sym-

⁵ See, for example: *Introducere în filosofia lui Platon* (1994, 2002, 2008), *Filosofia în cetate. Trei fabule de filosofie politică și o introducere* (1999), *Leibniz - filosof al Europei baroce* (2001), *Vârsta rațiunii. Ipostaze filosofice ale iluminismului* (2002), *Permanența idealismului german. Studii și eseuri privind idealismul german* (2003).

⁶ See: *Lumile și trecerile lui Eminescu* (2004), *Încercare asupra filosofiei românești. Schița unui profil istoric* (2002), *Filosofia ideii naționale la L. Blaga și D.D. Roșca* (1996).

posium organised in 2007 in order to celebrate the complete translation of Plotinus's *Enneads* into Romanian. The essay investigates the competing doctrinarian forces of Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Christianity, with a view to explaining how Hellenic rationalism had to surrender to the Christian promise of atonement and salvation. The analysis ends with a brief commentary on Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that the victory of Christianity over Greece was the greatest cultural failure in history (32-34).

If the first lecture ends with Nietzsche, the second begins with the same philosopher's argument that the Renaissance is the most important moment in the formation of the modern world. Vasile Muscă distances himself from Nietzsche's claim and proves that it was the Age of the Enlightenment that has actually brought the most important contribution to the shaping of modernity. This lecture was delivered in Sibiu, in 2007, at a symposium on the Enlightenment. It represents the longest section and is also the one that gave the title to the volume. Here Vasile Muscă works towards explaining the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment, seen primarily as a philosophical movement. Philosophy as the manifestation of reason, the departure from the Cartesian model, the decay of the metaphysical construction of a universal reason, the conceptual reconfigurations resulting from the spatial and temporal emplacements of reason, or the division between an ancient and a modern reason are all briefly explored in order to pave the way for an interesting discussion of the conflictual dynamics between reason and history. Voltaire's philosophy of history and Hegel's history of philosophy are the concepts used by Vasile Muscă in order to advance the discussion towards explaining the

emergence of historicism as "a reaction against Cartesianism"⁷ (48).

It is only after a rather lengthy presentation of the Enlightenment's appropriation of a particular understanding of reason that the thesis of this section becomes clear. What Vasile Muscă intends to explore here is the pair of "intellectual experiences" that refuse to subscribe to the Enlightenment's "dominant intellectual formula", namely "the irrationalism of feeling, as the opposite of reason, which led to the emergence of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy" and "individual irrationalism, as the opposite of the universal, which led to the formation of another philosophical discipline, the philosophy of history, as one of the most important and long-lasting philosophical contributions of the Age of the Enlightenment" (53).

The discussion on the emergence of the philosophy of history in the eighteenth century clarifies the link between this section and the preceding one when it brings to the discussion Karl Löwith's claim that it had already been announced by the transition from Hellenism to Christianity (58). Vasile Muscă explains the evolution of this new way of thinking about philosophy and history through a detailed and very clear analysis of the development and (re)configuration of the notions of time, progress, and humanity in their transition from classical antiquity, to Christianity, and to modernity.

This second section ends with a brief overview of Kant's famous take on the Enlightenment, with emphasis on its feature as an ongoing process. This ending very nicely announces the transition to the next section of the volume, an essay meant as a tribute to Immanuel Kant, upon the commemoration of two centu-

⁷ All of the quotes are translated from the Romanian by the reviewer.

ries since his death. This essay starts from Kant's well-known definition of the Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity" (82) and then moves on to elaborate on Kant's contribution to philosophy in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

The next section of the volume moves chronologically, towards the nineteenth century, and focuses on the German Romanticism. The discussion departs from Kant, as the philosopher who "humanized philosophy" (96) and whose philosophy opened the path towards the Romantic exploration of man's inner life. The essay continues as a rather factual presentation of the German Romantic movement as consolidated around *Athenäum* magazine and the Jena Romantic circle, and then extends to encompass the cultural, scientific, artistic, and philosophical reverberations of the movement, outside the circle and the magazine.

The fifth section of the volume begins with an entertaining anecdote about Hegel and Napoleon, a pretext for a challenging discussion on the hermeneutics of history. This interpretive exercise proves a very clever method of briefly explaining the Hegelian position on the philosophy of history as expressed in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The next essay remains in the same sphere of the nineteenth-century German philosophy, but moves towards the last decades of the century and to Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical work. It is meant as an informative explanation of Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, a compilation of fragments taken from the philosopher's notes and put together by his sister. From the factual presentation of the editorial history of the volume, the essay progresses towards an analysis of the 'will to power' as a fundamental princi-

ple of Nietzschean philosophy and works towards its integration into a system.

The last section of the volume opens with Nietzsche's appreciation for the classical age and for the Renaissance as watershed moments in the evolution of mankind. Nietzsche's argument is, most likely, used mainly as a transition from the previous section, because this last essay of the volume discusses the contribution of two Romanian philosophers, P.P. Negulescu and M. Florian, to the exploration of the European Renaissance. As the author explains, the two philosophers were chosen also because their works represent snapshots of two historical moments crucial for Romanian history, namely the period before World War I (P.P. Negulescu) and that immediately following World War II (M. Florian) (179). Although from different standpoints, both philosophers insist on the centrality of humanism in Renaissance studies.

Vasile Muscă's *Iluminism și Istorism (Enlightenment and Historicism)* is a dense, but very accessible volume. It is, for the most part, friendly with its readers, as it engages complex philosophical questions and then successfully explains them to the understanding of readers who do not need extensive training in philosophy. However, the volume could have benefited from a preface or foreword, to guide the reader in the attempt to understand the author's general approach, the connection among the sections, and the overall design of the volume. Despite this minor inconvenience, *Iluminism și Istorism (Enlightenment and Historicism)* could prove a useful and informative reading, not only for scholars and students of philosophy, but also for students of philology (the first two sections of the volumes would be of great help to those who study the literature of the Enlightenment).

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