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**Jeremy Shaw**

**"Single Vision and Newton's Sleep"<sup>1</sup>**

**-The Enlightenment and Modern Literature-**

*Notes on the occlusion of modern consciousness, and towards a  
reparative literary strategy*

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## **Zusammenfassung/Summary:**

### **"Single Vision and Newton's Sleep" -The Enlightenment and Modern Literature-**

explores the intellectual and historical background and consequences of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century faith in an idea of reason which, developed to an ideological reality principle, would have the profoundest impact on modernity.

The contrast between a concept of socially (and implicitly, morally) 'healthy' rationality and 'unhealthy' (and implicitly, vicious) imagination has defined the limits of intellectual and social dispute since antiquity, as Plato's idealist political, philosophical and theological reinterpretation of Homer, and the Roman Stoics' moral-social literary criticism passed uninterruptedly into early-capitalist (mediaeval) and early-scientific (Renaissance) mores. Climaxing finally in a full-blown social and moral philosophico-theological codex of reason, a rationalist ideology celebrated and centralised itself in the progressive materialist and mercantilist values of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The basis of its purported 'Enlightenment' was the claimed resolution of the implicit conflict between faith and knowledge, subjectivity and objectivity, the individual and the society which had escaped conclusive focus in the previous phases of the problematic. Some cultural historians have for this reason placed the 'beginning of the modern' at this point of Europe's social-intellectual development, ignoring the Renaissance and the 'golden' 17<sup>th</sup> century as the watershed between the mediaeval and modern. The present work indicates by contrast that concepts of ages and watersheds are in themselves quite artificial and deny the clear continuities passing uninterrupted from one historical-intellectual phase to condition the next.

Part One, headed "Sowing the Whirlwind", discusses the circumstances and literary contributions of the Renaissance and 17<sup>th</sup> century to the general historical and social-intellectual context of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which the rationalist paradigm of the Enlightenment could root and flourish. Part Two, "The Eye of the Storm", comprising chapters six to eight, considers the literature of model topics and themes of Enlightenment ideology indicative for the modern period. The later chapters of the work, in Part Three, "Reaping the Whirlwind", identify the consequences of these tendencies for the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, revealed in literary works documenting the detrimental effects of 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism in the absence of modern corrective intellectual and artistic values. Focusing on Romanticism, Marxism, or Existentialism as typical interpretative-defensive 'strategic' responses to these unwelcome and damaging consequences of radical idealist rationalism permits us to assess the impact of an Enlightenment ideology of reason on the individual and his subjectivity as formulated and discoursed in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Here the clear inadequacy and limits of available literary-artistic and social compensation available within the overall context of a rationalist ethos are documented as failure to overcome the continuing divisions and contradictions inseparable from the paradigm of idealist reason.

Our final conclusions outline the possibility, and necessity, of a truly adequate, aesthetic, response to the resultant modern anomie and alienation, with a reparative, literary, strategy.