

# DEMIGODS & PICKPOCKETS

## THE AUGUSTAN MYTH

### IN SWIFT AND ROUSSEAU

THE term 'Augustan' as applied to the culture of the early eighteenth century conveniently describes (among other things) a prevailing attitude towards classical antiquity. Since this attitude was part of the climate of thought in which the writers I am going to discuss lived and worked, I shall begin by referring to some of its characteristics, though without any attempt to trace its development in the course of the century. First there is the tradition of classical study going back far beyond the Augustan age. 'It is not easy for us', says Christopher Dawson, 'to realize the strength of this classical tradition. For three hundred years men had lived a double life. The classical world was the standard of their thought and conduct. In a sense, it was more real to them than their own world, for they had been taught to know the history of Rome better than that of England or modern Europe; to judge their literature by the standard of Quintilian, and to model their thought on Cicero and Seneca. Ancient history was history in the absolute sense, and the ages that followed were a shadowy and unreal world which could only be rationalized by being related in some way to the classical past'. (*Edward Gibbon, in Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1934, pp. 162-3). To this pre-occupation with the documents of classical antiquity, Augustanism adds the conscious and consciously successful emulation of the 'best' periods of ancient civilization, and the conviction, growing more rigorous and dogmatic with the Enlightenment, that true civilization is a matter of occasional islands in a sea of darkness. To quote Mr. Dawson again, 'he (Gibbon) believed like Voltaire that the human race had experienced a few moments of rare felicity, relatively equal to one another, but separated by gulfs of barbarism and ignorance. In Voltaire's words, 'Every age has produced heroes and politicians, every people has experienced revolutions, all history is almost equal for those who only wish to store their memories with facts. But whoever thinks, or (what is more rare) whoever possesses taste, only counts four centuries in the history of the world?' These four centuries are the classical age of Greece, the Augustan age of Rome, the age of the Renaissance, in Italy, and the age of Louis XIV'. (*op. cit.*, p. 173). And again, 'he (Gibbon) was conscious of the European achievement and he felt himself to be a member of a society that was not inferior in culture and politeness to that of classical Rome. He stood on the summit of the Renaissance achievement and looked back over the waste of history to ancient Rome, as from one mountain top to another'. (p. 164).

Such a powerful and omnipresent 'myth' could not fail to have its influence even on those who were out of sympathy with, and in

more or less open revolt against, the prevailing tendencies of their age, and it is the purpose of this essay to examine the use to which the notion of classical antiquity is put by two of the most notable dissidents of the age, Swift and Rousseau. Some notable similarities will appear through the great and obvious differences of temperament and background. It may be as well to insist on some of the differences to begin with, in case the confrontation of the two writers should suggest that they are being treated indifferently as raw material for a particular thesis. In the first place, I take it for granted that Rousseau is incomparably the more important figure in the history of European culture. Moreover much of his treatment of antiquity forms an integral part of his most mature and valuable thought, and with that I shall not be concerned. My purpose makes it necessary for me to give special prominence to that side of his treatment of antiquity which reflects personal maladjustment, and it is there that he comes closest to Swift, in whom there is nothing to correspond to the positive side of Rousseau's achievement as a thinker. On the other hand there are isolated passages in Swift which express the attitude that is in a measure common to both with greater power and intensity than *that particular* attitude is expressed anywhere in Rousseau.

The conventional Augustan attitude, in spite of its strength and its value in imparting 'that sense of living membership in a great tradition and a classical order which Gibbon with all his limitations of spiritual vision still possessed' (Dawson, *op. cit.*, p. 180), was not so firmly rooted that it could not be twisted to quite un-Augustan purposes by a writer out of tune with the society in which he found himself. The picture of antiquity it presented had some of the flimsiness of an arbitrarily selective construction—the notion of a 'classical' period is itself arbitrary in a way incompatible with a truly historical attitude. The vitality it had was to a great extent infused into it by those who wholeheartedly lived an Augustan life and projected their own interests into the age they idealized. And this process of projection was largely carried on through the medium of creative literature—translation or adaptation in the manner of Pope's *Imitations of Horace*. Anyone who cared to use the same selective and fundamentally unhistorical method for different ends might be expected to produce disconcerting results. And that is what Swift did. On the face of it nothing could be more respectably Augustan than the plan of the *Battle of the Books*—a satirical and mock-heroic contribution to a fashionable controversy. But the result is that, if we were to follow where Swift leads us, very little at all would be left of the whole subject of the controversy. Relatively slight though the *Battle of the Books* is, it affords an example of Swift's capacity to 'make the Augustan positives look like negatives' (Leavis, *Revaluation*, p. 110). What Swift does succeed in conveying is the strength of his revulsion from the pedantry and malignity he attributes to the moderns. The unsubstantiality of what he sets up in opposition to them is a close parallel to the lifelessness that characterizes the Houyhnhnms in contrast to the Yahoos.

So much is obvious; but my present purpose is to point out what use Swift is able to make of antiquity as a symbol for the expression of his disgust at all that is typified by the Spider of his apologue. All that Swift needs to do is to cut off the classics from the communication with the life of his own day that was furnished by the conscious 'Augustanizing' and self-projecting I have mentioned; and he was left with a symbol that peculiarly fitted his purposes through combining the characters of emotive potency and absence of any positive or definite content. It would be impossible to form any clear idea from the *Battle of the Books* what the ancients did stand for; 'honey and wax', 'sweetness and light', are the merest counters. But we know that they are designed to stand for 'a good thing',<sup>1</sup> and the prestige of antiquity together with the force of Swift's presentation are sufficient to produce the requisite effect on us.

It is this intensity divorced from definite content that Swift often calls in the associations of classical antiquity to promote, though commonly with rather more appearance of particular reference than in the *Battle of the Books*. An illuminating instance occurs in the poem *To Stella Visiting me in my Sickness*. The treatment of honour in this poem is typical of Swift's mode of presenting the values in which his feelings are most deeply involved. Direct definition is despised, and Swift plunges into the undifferentiated but emotionally charged feeling of totality.

But (not in wranglings to engage  
With such a stupid vicious age)  
If honour I would here define,  
It answers faith in things divine . . .  
Those numerous virtues which the tribe  
Of tedious moralists describe,  
And by such various titles call,  
True honour comprehends them all.

The next paragraph of the poem dissociates true honour from its sordid and false social counterparts ('when a whore in her vocation Keeps punctual to an assignation', etc.), and Swift then continues:

In points of honour to be try'd ,  
All passions must be laid aside;  
Ask no advice, but think alone;  
Suppose the question not your own.  
How shall I act? is not the case;  
But how would Brutus in my place?  
In such a cause would Cato bleed?  
And how would Socrates proceed?

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<sup>1</sup>'May we not, for example, be affected with the promise of a *good thing*, though we have not an idea of what it is?'—Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction, Section 20.

The moralist's stock figures are treated as symbols, not as flesh and blood; and they are suited for Swift's purpose because of their combination of remoteness and traditional prestige. The use made of this prestige is brought home by the next paragraph, in which Swift plunges back into the congenial attitude of revulsion from the actual.

Drive all objections from your mind,  
Else you relapse to human-kind;  
Ambition, avarice, and lust,  
And factious rage, and breach of trust, . . . .  
Envy, and cruelty, and pride,  
Will in your tainted heart preside.

Antiquity is treated in a similar vein and in a similar context in Part III of *Gulliver's Travels* (chh. 7 and 8). The art of deflation is practised on such of the traditions of antiquity as Swift finds it convenient to reject in order to create a sort of moral vacuum around the reputations he does endorse. '(Alexander) assured me upon his Honour that he was not poisoned, but dyed of a Fever by excessive Drinking'; and by way of contrast: 'I desired that the Senate of *Rome* might appear before me in one large Chamber, and a modern Representative, in Counterview, in another. The first seemed to be an Assembly of Heroes and Demy-Gods; the other a Knot of Pedlars, Pick-pockets, Highwaymen and Bullies'. And the bloodless stock figures of 'virtue' appear again: 'I had the Honour to have much Conversation with *Brutus*; and was told that his Ancestor *Junius*, *Socrates*, *Epaminondas*, *Cato* the Younger, Sir *Thomas More* and himself, were perpetually together: a *Sextumvirate* to which all the Ages of the World cannot add a Seventh'. The selective and unhistorical treatment of the civilization of the past which Swift found current, and which became canonized in the view of Voltaire quoted at the beginning of this paper, was pushed by him to the point where a handful of 'virtuous' heroes look down in disdain on a world of irretrievable corruption. (Who can believe that *Socrates* and *More* at least did not soon tire of the somewhat limited resources of the company in which Swift placed them?) But though antiquity itself can be stomachached only in a rigidly selective presentation, yet 'I was chiefly disgusted with modern History'. The paragraphs the first of which opens thus do indeed convey little but a schematization of disgust, culminating in the pragmatic justification of the corruption he describes: 'that positive, confident, restive Temper, which Virtue infused into Man, was a perpetual Clog to business'.

It is in the passage from *Gulliver's Travels* that the strain in Swift's writings that I have tried to trace brings him closest to Rousseau's *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts*. This work is of course a highly rhetorical and an immature specimen of Rousseau's thought, but is all the more significant as a reflection of one side of Rousseau's temperament. In one of the most famous passages of the *Confessions* he describes the state of excitement into which he

was thrown by reading the announcement of the prize essay of the Academy of Qijon: Si le progrès des Sciences et des Arts a contribué à épurer les mœurs. And a revulsion from contemporary society comparable to that of Swift (though much less inhibited) has resulted in a similar selection of symbols. The treatment throughout is a schematic-moralistic one, leaning heavily on highly emotive and undefined key-words, notably 'vertu' (*cf.* Swift's 'virtue', and in the poem quoted earlier 'honour'). The comparison of the senate with a 'modern Representative' recurs: 'l'assemblée de deux cents hommes vertueux, dignes de commander à Rome et de gouverner la terre'. Socrates and Cato again make their appearance. Sparta is called a 'république de demi-dieux' because of the 'vertu' of its citizens.

The ways by which Swift and Rousseau arrived at these similar uses of the notion of classical antiquity were widely different. Moreover for Rousseau the stage represented by the *First Discourse* was a transitory one, though its attitude continues to be one of the strains running through his work. What is expressed in the *First Discourse* is overwhelmingly negative, but the moralistic revulsion from contemporary society was more closely associated with constructive ideals in Rousseau than in Swift. For an idealized Sparta and Rome were only part of the weapons with which Rousseau assailed eighteenth century French society, and they were associated in his development with something which had more body and actuality—his native city of Geneva. It was in his earliest years that Plutarch's Greeks and Romans had come to stand for an exalted 'vertu' that counteracted the eighteenth-century romances which had given material for the day-dreams of the sickly and hypochondriacal child—'Plutarque surtout devint ma lecture favorite . . . je préférerai bientôt Agésilas, Brutus, Aristide, à Orondate, Artamène, et Juba'. And in making this use of Plutarch Rousseau was not following a wholly idiosyncratic course; moralistic idealization resting on Plutarch had its basis in the attitude of the rather consciously out-of-date Calvinism of eighteenth-century Geneva, and Rousseau's own father had given him the cue. As the son, no doubt not without rhetorical idealization was later to express it: 'Je le vois encore, vivant du travail de ses mains, et nourrissant son âme des vérités les plus sublimes. Je vois Tacite, Plutarque et Grotius, mêlés devant lui avec les instruments de son métier'. (*Discours sur l'Inégalité*, Dédicace).

In Rousseau's mature work, the Rome-Sparta theme, made more substantial and less arbitrary and rhetorical through the sobering influence of Montesquieu, and deepened by Rousseau's strong Platonism, came to form one of the bases of his constructive thought; meanwhile in its moralistic and satiric use it brought him, as I have tried to show, closer perhaps to Swift than to any other author of the century. The comparison may be documented a little further. Rousseau shares Swift's aversion for modern history, that tangled, sordid and—the crucial point—inescapably living flesh-and-blood fabric: 'Quant à moi, qui n'aime à considérer que les exemples

dont l'humanité s'intruse et s'honore : moi qui ne sais voir parmi mes contemporains que des maîtres insensibles et des peuples gémissants, des guerres qui n'intéressent personne et désolent tout le monde, des armées immenses en temps de paix et sans effet en temps de guerre, des ministres toujours occupés pour ne rien faire, des traités mystérieux sans objet, des alliances longtemps négociées et rompues le lendemain, enfin des sujets d'autant plus méprisés que le prince est plus puissant : je tire le rideau sur ces objets de douleur et de désolation ; et ne pouvant soulager nos maux, j'évite au moins de les contempler.

'Mais je me plais à tourner les yeux sur ces vénérables images de l'antiquité où je vois les hommes élevés par de sublimes institutions au plus haut degré de grandeur et de vertu ou puisse atteindre la sagesse humaine, etc'. (*Political Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Vaughan, vol. 1, p. 314).

There are germs here of much that is important in Rousseau's philosophy, but it is the first paragraph, with its sense of aimless sordid wasted activity, that I want to insist on here, in contrast to the mere formula or gesture that passes muster for a positive corrective. 'J'évite de les contempler'—it is this strong feeling of revulsion from the actualities of life that has, we cannot help thinking, conditioned the way in which Rousseau sees the scene he presents so vividly. It is perhaps not impossible to get a fair notion of what Rousseau means by 'vertu' in such passages as this and the numerous ones in which it occurs in the *First Discourse*. (Schinz has made an elaborate discrimination of three different senses, which I feel to be rather imposed on Rousseau in virtue of a preconceived view of the various elements in European culture than drawn from Rousseau's own work). But the immediate impression is surely that it is a formula which derives its emotive potency from that to which it stands in contrast, and it is only to be expected that Rousseau in his rhetorical peroration to the *Discourse* should renounce any attempt to give an account of this 'science sublime des âmes simples', and to ask: 'Tes principes ne sont-ils pas gravés dans tous les coeurs?'

Of a piece with the characteristics discussed is the anti-meta-physical tendency which Rousseau like Swift gives to his moralism in the *First Discourse*: 'Qui voudrait passer sa vie à de stériles contemplations, si chacun, ne consultant que les devoirs de l'homme et les besoins de la nature, n'avait de temps que pour la patrie, pour les malheureux, et pour ses amis? Sommes-nous donc faits pour mourir attachés sur les bords du puits ou la vérité s'est retirée?'

The parallels drawn in this paper may not add up to very much. I have found that they illuminate both writers for me, but such coincidence as there may be does not cover more than a part of what makes either important. If any wider inference is to be drawn from the comparison, it is perhaps the one suggested earlier, that there was a certain instability, arising out of its unhistorical nature, in the Augustan 'myth' which lent itself to being twisted to the unorthodox purposes of Swift and Rousseau.

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## ‘MEASURE FOR MEASURE’<sup>1</sup>

**M**OST writing that has attained a certain level of complexity has moral implications. The writer may not, in many cases, be altogether aware of them. Great poems may draw their inspiration exclusively from moments of intense and unrelated experience; and indeed, since no such poem can be conceived without intensity of this kind, these moments may be said to have autonomous, independent value. But this is not in the long run enough. Sooner or later, at least in a civilized society, the poet is faced with the problem of putting his experiences together, of moulding them into some intelligible organic structure; and this work of evaluation and selection calls for standards and so, in the broadest sense, for a morality. It is only by recognising the presence of this need in Shakespeare that we can grasp the peculiar spirit of *Measure for Measure*.

That spirit is essentially, uncompromisingly moral. The need for constant standards and for their enforcement by the civil power is everywhere stated and underlined. It is to strengthen it that the Duke, at the beginning of the play, calls upon Angelo; and even Claudio, who is most directly interested in the loosening of bonds that condemn him to immediate death, agrees that the sentence passed upon him is just. When Lucio asks him why he has been arrested, his reply is quite unequivocal. His plight, he says, proceeds—

From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty;  
As surfeit is the father of much fast,  
So every scope by the immoderate use  
Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,  
Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,  
A thirsty evil; and when we drink we die. (I, ii)

Claudio's speech, however, does more than confirm the necessary ruthlessness of the law. Its verbal qualities point, in the expression, to the motive that compelled the assertion of that ruthlessness. The linguistic power of *Measure for Measure*, far from expanding easily into lyricism or rhetoric, is subordinated to a supple bareness and concentrated most often upon an intense underlining of the value of single words. This does not mean that the effect is necessarily simple. No word in Claudio's speech is logically superfluous, but more than one is, in its context, surprising. The verb 'ravin', for instance, suggests bestial, immoderate feeding, and therefore 'appetite', but the next line proceeds, through a 'thirsty evil', to transfer the meta-

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<sup>1</sup>This essay, originally planned as a lecture, was written away from England before the discussion on this play in *Scrutiny* (January, 1942) came to hand. It is offered in the belief that something useful can still be said on this very intricate subject.