

Rousseau and the Ancients
Rousseau et les Anciens

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sous la direction de

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Introduction

The Ancients have often receded from the picture as Western intellectuals have focused on attempting to understand modernity, particularly in the face of the challenges of what has come to be called postmodernism. But to revert to them is not necessarily to invite a reiteration of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Many of the defining figures of modernity — Montesquieu, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, arguably even Machiavelli — themselves repaired to premodern thought for the resources to challenge what was understood as modernity in their own time. The Ancients were admired even by those “Moderns” who did not think they need be revered as representing the peak and perfection of art and philosophy. Their admiration took a variety of forms and was compounded by the general assumption that most of the period since the decline of ancient civilizations had seen little but devastation, ignorance and superstition. It is hardly possible to understand modernity truly without taking into account its ways of admiring antiquity.

Rousseau’s perspective is rather particular in that pre-modern man to him also represents the closest evidence we can attain of what the pre-civilized one might have been. Although he certainly does not think of the Ancients as in any sense primitive, they are nonetheless closer to what might have been “primitive” virtues, closer to nature and less spoiled by layer after layer of various kinds of social “progress”. Rousseau’s “Ancients” include the Old Testament patriarchs, to whose severity he is drawn as he is to the Stoic philosophers. And these virtues extended to social values; to Rousseau, it was as if the Ancient world at least sometimes provided a climate in which it was difficult not to be virtuous, or even heroic.

In every area of Rousseau’s work — on music, nature, politics, language, philosophy — he has recourse to the ancient philosophers, myths and heroes, and their spokesmen, particularly Plutarch. Sometimes they are invoked directly and sometimes they are silent interlocutors, but they are never absent from Rousseau’s conceptualization of the problems that consume his thinking. He invokes the Ancients as a source of heuristic models or archetypes; as alternatives to all existing experience that can serve as a standpoint for criticism of the present reality; as an evocative language with which to speak to his contemporaries. The essays in this volume reflect the wide variety of forms in which Rousseau appropriated ancient thought and brought it to bear on every subject that he touched.

From his own testimony, we know the powerful effect of the Ancient

models on the development of Rousseau's moral imagination. Rousseau recounts that at the age of seven,

Plutarch, above all, became my favorite reading. The pleasure I derived from rereading him endlessly helped cure me of Novels [...]. These engrossing readings, and the discussions they provoked between my father and me, forged the free, republican spirit, the proud, irrepressible character, resistant to yoke and servitude, that has tormented me my whole life long in situations least apt to give it flight. Constantly absorbed by Rome and Athens; spending my time, so to speak, with their great men, I who was born Citizen of a Republic, and son of a father whose love of country was his dominant passion, like him became aflame with it; I felt like a Greek or a Roman; I became the character whose life I was reading; the account of instances of fortitude and fearlessness which had impressed me put a glimmer in my eyes and strength in my voice. One day when I was recounting the story of Scaevola at table, the others were startled to see me extend my hand and hold it over a burner to represent his act. (*Confessions*, p.8)

Plutarque, surtout, devint ma lecture favorite. Le plaisir que je prenais à le relire sans cesse me guérit un peu des Romans, et je préférai bientôt Agésilas, Brutus, Aristide à Orondate, Artamène et Juba. De ces intéressantes lectures, des entretiens qu'elles occasionnaient entre mon père et moi, se forma cet esprit libre et républicain, ce caractère indomptable et fier, impatient de joug et de servitude qui m'a tourmenté tout le temps de la vie dans les situations les moins propres à lui donner l'essor. Sans cesse occupé de Rome et d'Athènes; vivant, pour ainsi dire, avec leurs grands hommes, né moi-même Citoyen d'une République, et fils d'un père dont l'amour de la patrie était la plus forte passion, je m'en enflammais à son exemple; je me croyais Grec ou Romain; je devenais le personnage dont je lisais la vie: le récit des traits de constance et d'intrépidité qui m'avaient frappé me rendait les yeux étincellants et la voix forte. Un jour que je racontais à table l'aventure de Scévola, on fut effrayé de me voir avancer et tenir ma main sur un réchaud pour représenter son action. (*Pléiade* 9)

This account suggests as well that, from reading about the Ancients, this most literary philosopher may have learned the transformative power of the written word. Rousseau, the creator of such powerful characters as Emile, Julie and his own biographical persona, becomes a modern Plutarch.

Fully to understand Rousseau on his own terms, as well as fully to understand ourselves as moderns, it is necessary to confront Rousseau and the Ancients. Rousseau remains a crucial thinker for anyone who wishes to understand the complex relation between the ancient and the modern and the role of the ancients in fashioning the conception of the modern in any given period.

The papers in this volume were presented at the eleventh biennial colloquium of the North American Association for the Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on 20–23 May 1999, at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. The papers intersect in their thematic content. They are presented here,

not grouped in fixed categories, but in an order which follows a flow of themes — language, music, philosophy, Plato, gender roles, citizenship, etc. — so that the reader will find that each paper has clear relationships with those contiguous to it both before and after.

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