

# The Ideological Epistolary Space of Otium

Alexandra Roxana Mărginean  
Romanian-American University

## ***Abstract***

*This paper is part of a larger study and concerns the emergence of a cultural phenomenon called the Augustan verse epistle, which appeared against the background of a struggle between ideologies. Two forces confronted one another: the aristocracy, whose representatives struggled to preserve classical values, and the new bourgeoisie, led by mercantile interests. The Augustan verse epistle was poetry of ideological intervention, seeking the promotion of values that were facing the danger of falling into oblivion or of becoming obsolete. The Augustans used to withdraw from the hassle of a changing world to the privacy of their library – an attitude that was the core of what came to be known as otium, in opposition to the characteristic attitude of the new bourgeoisie that promoted the future space of flows and negotium.*

## ***Keywords***

*aristocracy, new bourgeoisie, otium, necotium*

The Augustan verse epistle appeared against the background of a battle of ideologies between the aristocracy whose representatives struggled to preserve classical values and the new bourgeoisie whose money-oriented interests suited the evolution of society towards mercantilism. Augustan verse epistle was a poetry of ideological intervention, which sought the promotion of values that were menaced to fall into oblivion and become obsolete. The Augustans would withdraw into the private space of their library and would study the classics or write their own creations to the purposes mentioned above – this attitude was the core of what was called *otium*.

*Otium* implied solitude, isolation, which characterized the Augustan artist who sought refuge from the changing world and reached for kindred companionship far from a fallen social reality. On the contrary, isolation was opposed by the new bourgeoisie whose eagerness to make money could only have been satisfied by constant contact with others who shared the same interests; profit and generally financial and material satisfaction were acquired on condition that contact with the rest of the world was maintained, and this contact meant mainly commercial exchange, which denied the attitude of *otium* or, in other words, promoted *necotium*. The opposition between Augustan values and the values of the new bourgeoisie appeared quite clearly illustrated by the terms *otium* and, respectively, *necotium*.

*Otium* will be treated here as a metaphorical space, whose various functions will be described. Two of them have already been mentioned more or less clearly. First, *otium* was a place of ideological intervention from the part of Augustan aristocracy, whose representatives, although deprived of economic power, which was in the hands of the new bourgeoisie, still had control over civic mythology. Some of the Augustans' verse epistles were satires – for instance Pope's late poetry. Satire was the means to unmask the nakedness of the “new” new class in terms of morality on the one hand to remind people of the almost lost classical values, to signal the danger of their becoming out-fashioned. Secondly, it was a sanctuary, a refuge, a shelter which protected one from the aggression of a new time whose characteristics opposed those of previous periods.

*Otium* was the space of verse epistles. The choice of epistolary writing was not made by accident, as through their creations the Augustans sought one another and established a communication with those who shared their views for the sake of a better intervention and for the psychological comfort of seeing their beliefs being reinforced in solidarity. Nevertheless, this conversation was not solely motivated by a need for bonding and for contacting those who were thinking alike, to the purpose of establishing a cultural brotherhood. It also served the purpose of fighting a post-Cartesian or post-Lockean terror of solipsism, defined as “the haunting fear that one's consciousness is all there is and that the world and other people may be no more than figments of the solitary mind” [1, 11]. It appeared therefore as a very serious exercise which helped to the preservation of sanity and to keeping a well-balanced, active mind.

Nevertheless, conversation not only took place among the Augustans, but also assumed the shape of a dialogue with the dead. This was how reading the classics was viewed. *Otium* was the space which enabled one to defy space and time, annihilate them and proceed to the reunion with great personalities that lived long before the time they were invoked. *Otium* acquired in this sense a mystical aura of a place where magic was performed. Presenting itself as an environment favourable to communication between people who shared the same ideals and ideas and whose connection was therefore more special than any ordinary elation, *otium* – a space of isolation – became, paradoxically, a place that favoured and nurtured friendship.

Activities that took place in *otium* served a philosophical purpose, besides the socio-political one of intervention, as the Augustans were keen on practising Aristotle's *Nosce te ipsum*, which had taken the shape of introspection as leading to knowledge about human nature with Saint Augustine. Locke or Hume militated for scrutiny of oneself, as they believed it enabled one to discover truths that were

applicable to all human beings. *Otium* favoured the expansion of knowledge from the micro-level to the macro-level from individuality and the particular to all human beings and the general. Knowing oneself led to the discovery of data that could be applied to the others, and knowing the others meant taking interest in the creation of God, getting acquainted with God's work, so the ontological initiative was at the same time religious, which transformed *otium* into a space of religiosity, of exercising one's faith, and of the sacred.

The atmosphere of *otium* was imbued with the presence of the sacred not only in the ontotheological sense, but also in a mythological one, standing in opposition to a desacralized world deprived of imagination, in which fancy was forgotten and considered a waste of time in a society dominated by a pragmatic, mercantile spirit. The Augustans tried the recuperation of a world that was still under the sign of the sacred by appeal to elements that were grounded in Virgilian mythology and opposed this ideal to the fallen world of modernity.

This attitude explained the perception of *otium* as a centre and space of creation. Both these functions were twofold. *Otium* was a centre for the Augustans as order (presenting an alternative ideal of order based on the revalorisation of classical values which blatantly contradicted the contemporary tendencies in the evolution of thought); – so what tended to become the margin for a society that embraced a new material awareness was still preserved as central and promoted as such by what appeared to be a group of nostalgic characters – the Augustans – who had previously represented a centre in themselves. Secondly, the attitude of *otium* went hand in hand with a certain type of discourse, namely aristocratic, which of course was different from every-day discourse practised by the masses: “The moral dimension of aristocratic discourse derives from its power to dispel, during the magical moment of its duration, the raw vulgarity and teeming bustle of an importunate modernity” [1, 71]. Augustan literary expression in epistles is verse – more formalized therefore – which points to the same conservatory orientation, but also to an attempt of institutionalising this expression as a way of redeeming solitude in the name of community.

The literary productions of which I have talked above as forms of writing characteristic of the Augustans reveal *otium* as the space of creation. Creation also referred to the construction of an audience among the members of a larger reading public of a more restrictive group that was responsive to the message of the aristocratic speech and therefore shared the ideas and views of the Augustans. They did not only create literature but a sense of solidarity, of preference for a refined taste and for classical values and attempted to awake people to a higher degree of awareness.

*Otium* was used as a space in which the learned man could act as a uniter of consciousness – all enumerated functions of *otium* point to this. A parallel between the Augustans' work in *otium* and the demands of the Confucian philosophy may be drawn, as their interest in the classics – in conversing with the dead and then in awaking consciousness matched the action of the Confucian ideal man.

In opposition to the attitude expressed by *otium*, the adepts of *necotium* embraced quite different values, seeking human contact in order to ensure a propitious environment for business and consequently for material gain. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was intensely marked by the commodity culture which developed to such an extent that it grew into a mentality and therefore motivated every human action, even those that were supposedly governed by other principles. One of the discontents voiced by Lien Altangi, Goldsmith's character, was linked to the way in which the interest in money overtly marked people's thinking and became their chief priority. For instance, marriage stood under the sign of mercantilism. "If their goods and chattels can be brought to unite, their sympathetic souls are ever ready to guarantee the treaty" [2, 265]. The fact that the commercial spirit prevailed over Great Britain and the whole European world triggered blatantly ironic commentaries from Goldsmith through the intermediary of Lien, some verging on cynicism: "It is a proverb in China that an European suffers not even his spittle to be lost [...]" [2, 93].

Clearly the view expressed in the novel on the British people in particular (and Europeans in general) highlights the attitude of *necotium* which practically influenced every relation that established itself among the people of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Commerce flourished in Britain as it went hand in hand with imperialism and it represented the atmosphere of a new age – modernity.

### ***Bibliography***

---

1. Dowling, William C., *The Epistolary Moment. The Poetics of the Eighteenth – Century Verse Epistle*, London: Oxford University Press, 1991.
2. Goldsmith, Oliver, *The Miscellaneous Works*, London: Macmillan and co., 1878.
3. Habermas, Jurgen, "The Emergence of the Public Sphere", in *The Polity Press in Cultural Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge & Oxford: Polity Press, 1994.
4. Hunter, J. Paul, *Before Novels*, London: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1990.
5. Porter, Roy, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1990.