Rousseau's Venetian Story

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For more than two hundred years the Western world has kept its eyes fixed upon the image of Rousseau. We are strangely mesmerized by the gaze that meets our own across the centuries, and are moved by thoughts that stir with new life as we respond to them. This ardent contemplation and perpetual dialogue is not confined to the writer’s professed admirers. Their fervor, intense as it is, is equaled and even exceeded by that of his detractors. If this were not the case, surely we would relegate him to the dust. Instead, generations of serious scholars spend precious years scrutinizing the minutest aspects of his work and biography. Men of every nation and creed, of the most divergent interests and opposing convictions, devote their lives to the study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The bibliography thus accumulated is the most imposing monument that could ever be erected to the memory of a man.

What singular fascination can account for this continuous meditative dialogue with the past? Which view of Rousseau’s many-sided personality can explain it? Are we perturbed by the philosopher whose bold efforts to apprehend the truth and whose explorations in the realms of thought led him further than he dreamed in a reappraisal of things that finally shattered the old order and prepared the way for the new? Or are we roused by the moralist whose impassioned indictment of the senses sprang from a heart all too sensitive to their charms and whose tragic youth taught him at last the need for asceticism in man’s eternal
quest for happiness? For the author of *Emile* "had learned wisdom in the school of misfortune." Or is our imagination caught by the historical figure of one who was a witness of his time and whose testimony we can hardly resist pondering, whether we trust his literal veracity or not? Each of these facets of Rousseau's brooding spirit is a theme for the restless and ceaseless searches of thinkers, historians, and critics through the years, and any or every aspect he assumes could justify his phenomenal ascendancy today.

Yet this is not the whole story. Surely these multiple, particular profiles of the man do not entirely explain the universality and durability of his appeal for people who share or do not share his ideas, and who approve or do not approve of his morals. Above and beyond these controversial features is a power that encompasses them all and from which they derive their extraordinary effect. To be sure, Rousseau is a philosopher and a man of ideas. But he is also a great writer whose genius consists mainly in his mode of composition. Indeed felicity of form accounts to a very large extent for the prodigious vitality that saves him from oblivion, since ill-expressed ideas are soon forgotten, whether they are good or bad, but well-expressed ideas, whatever their value, are not so easily dismissed. Rousseau the writer enjoys that faculty whereby a man of rare personal endowments scrupulously renders his every impression, inclination, emotion, and idea as the pure and perfect likeness of himself and no one else, investing with new meaning even the most commonplace premise and uncertain conclusion, as well as all the wisdom or folly between them. Throughout his work expression is the ornament of doctrine and lends persuasion to thoughts and sentiments. By expression I mean not merely the words in which concepts are framed, but also the concrete form with which they are clothed, and especially the effective use of imagery. There are striking examples even in his most abstract works, like *Du Contrat social*, but the best
are to be found in his other books such as *Emile, Les Confessions*, and *Julie*, the novel which I have already studied from this point of view. In *Emile* he says openly that we must clothe reason with a body if we would make it felt. In fact so consequential is the formal presentation of feeling and thought in all his writings that one might wonder whether the true extent of his meaning and historical position can be fully grasped without an understanding of his artistic technique, any more than life may be interpreted without some perception, however elementary, of the symbolism residing in figures and events, that is, of the relationship existing between the form of things and their content.

Someone will say, of course, that these reflections are rather obvious and unnecessary. Rousseau's art is, after all, his least controversial aspect and the object of universal approval. Indeed readers of all persuasions may protest that, whatever his weaknesses may be, they are hardly artistic, that his literary virtues are unquestionable, that his eloquence is indisputable, in fine that his reputation as an artist is sufficiently well established after two hundred years. This is clearly so by common consent. It would be as unrealistic to challenge his prestige as a writer as it would be to question his fame as a man of ideas. I do not propose to be so bold. But just as the thinker requires study and exposition, so does the writer. Yet, curiously enough, while the ideas of the one have kindled the most violent reactions throughout the world of space and time, the literary and artistic intentions of the other have been shrouded in almost unbroken silence. Conceivably this is because of the revolutionary character of opinions that reflect the agitated spirit of the period and distract us from all other considerations. Whatever the reason, there is still a sad dearth of studies on the writer's art. It has either been ignored or accepted uncritically, as though there were no need to understand the principles and methods underlying the
formulation of thought and modifying, even determining, its very essence and its peculiar quality.

In the case of *Les Confessions*, however, Rousseau's art has not been entirely ignored. In the Pléiade edition of his complete works, currently being published, there is a general introduction to the subject containing seven pages devoted to the twelve books, valuable pages but all too few. They are signed by Messieurs Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, who pose the real problem of the autobiography in the following terms:

People have often considered Rousseau's memoirs with the eye of an examining magistrate who is bent upon convicting the author. For example, they have sought to know who presented a version of events closer to the truth, Jean-Jacques or Madame d'Epinay. A very legitimate preoccupation, an indispensable task. But *Les Confessions* is also a work of art.

Unfortunately all too often readers consider the book mainly as a piece of apologetics instead of the skillful narration it really is. If we treat it in this manner, then the lamentable passion for positivistic facts and equally positivistic judgments and the mania for determining the villain or victim of the piece and for indulging in personal moral speculation blinds us to the artistic merits upon which Rousseau's reputation is firmly founded and, worse still, deprives us of the aesthetic pleasure that fine writing always provides.

In our righteous or self-righteous indignation, we have forgotten that, if Rousseau is in effect the writer he is reputed to be, then he must fulfill the initial purpose of any work of art, which is to please those who are capable of responding. No other purpose, apologetic, political, religious, or moral can take precedence over this, for only after he has brought pleasure can he attain any other aim, or even win a hearing in the minds and hearts of men. He knew this as well as anyone when he wrote the following passage at the end of the fourth book of *Emile*, where the
adolescent undertakes the study of aesthetics:

The knowledge of what people may find pleasing or displeasing is necessary not only to anyone who needs their help, but also to anyone who wishes to be of use to them; you must please them if you would do them service and the art of writing is no idle pursuit if it is used to make men hear the truth.

Since, after two centuries, Rousseau suffers no lack of readers, it is incontestable that he achieves the objective of every art form and succeeds in pleasing. But we urgently need to know by what means he accomplishes this, especially because he does so whether his theme is controversial, ideological, or moral, whether it is in itself edifying, indecent, beautiful, monstrous, attractive, or repugnant. How does he do it? And from our point of view, how can we explain the fact that, if we possess taste and maturity of literary judgment, we may delight in his creativeness and derive aesthetic pleasure from his writing without sharing his views—or airing our own—on ethics, religion, politics, or other polemical issues, and without passing judgment on the writer as a man or even as a thinker? To show whence this pleasure proceeds and how the author fulfills the essential requirement of any genuine work of art and literature, we must probe the secrets of the man of letters. This is an arduous but imperative task. Unfortunately it has been neglected or ignored for the sake of preoccupations of a juridical, ethical, or philosophical order.

The present study does not presume to make provision for such a serious lacuna in the Rousseau bibliography. At most it may perhaps serve to draw attention to the problem it poses and to stimulate interest and further inquiry among critics. The value of its conclusions about the art of Les Confessions and the role of truth therein will have to be determined by the readers. Probably its significance is to be sought in a shift of emphasis, or if I may quote a correspondent, in the presentation of Rousseau "as an artist who lived and thought, as opposed to the traditional
view of Rousseau as a thinker who incidentally was a creative writer."

The style of this essay may also have a certain significance. It is carefully adapted to the themes of art and truth, and is therefore variable. Passages of exposition presenting Rousseau's own texts strive to reflect his original tone and attitudes; others recording historical and factual investigations demand more objective expression; while still others registering literary implications and interpretations, which are hardly revealed in all their fullness to the dispassionate intellect alone, require to be cast in a more personal mold. These variations in style are among the most unconventional aspects of the study and will therefore encounter most resistance on the part of anyone accustomed to a more rigid and consistent scientific form. Yet in reality they correspond to the various aspects and diverse functions of literary criticism itself which, after all, is not of such an uncomplicated nature as to be forever content with one and the same monotonous, often colorless and insipid, pedantic style. Such a presentation not only fails to satisfy the real needs of criticism but it also repels all readers except highly trained specialists. One might therefore be justified in questioning whether the interests of creative erudition are best served when it is embalmed and entombed, so to speak, in that manner. In the light of sweeping changes now being wrought in all spheres of life, thought, and education, some new experiments in scholarly methods may be advisable. The present study is one such experiment. It is an attempt on the part of modern scholarship to emerge from the rarefied atmosphere of esoteric research and to dwell among us. It seeks to serve the manifold purposes of its genre and at the same time to make itself readily comprehensible not merely to professors and professionals, but to educated people in general who may not aspire to be either, but who are nevertheless genuinely interested in literary problems.

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