Rousseau's Venetian Story
Ellis, Madeleine B.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Ellis, Madeleine B.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68471

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2412253
The seventh book of *Les Confessions* is a triptych, with the Venetian story as the central panel. The pattern of events at the end forms an artistic pendant to the year preceding the embassy appointment. There is a similar sequence of situations: fresh efforts to win fame and fortune in Paris, a renewal of musical aspirations in the completion of *Les Muses galantes* corresponding to the defense of ciphered music in the earlier period, new appeals to wealthy patrons of the arts, then more intimate confessions and recollections of friends, especially Diderot, already presented in the opening pages. Rousseau has intentionally extended his story in the last part to include a range of experience full enough to stand in counterpoise to the first. These two analogous narratives frame the Venetian story perfectly with their echoing responses of theme and character. They are well matched in length, even though the one represents but a single year and the other five times as much. The historian of the soul marks the years not by their number but by their weight. The spiritual evolution of those five dreary years in Paris scarcely outweighs by its fruits that of the Parisian debuts and is measured accordingly in the autobiography. The symmetry of the two panels is accentuated by the parallelism of existence in the French capital before and after the Vene-
tian drama. Both devices, symmetry and parallelism, contribute to produce a weary impression of the monotonous repetition of life. Once more art comes to the aid of the spirit to make the reader share the writer's burdensome sense of his "sad and slow career."¹

As he begins to retrace his steps in life after the Venetian disaster, the author of Les Confessions formulates the moral of the story. He writes:

The justice and futility of my complaints left in my soul a germ of indignation against our foolish civil institutions whereby the real public welfare and true justice are always sacrificed to some apparent order, in reality destructive of all order, that does nothing but add the sanction of public authority to the oppression of the weak and the iniquity of the strong.²

This passage recalls the thirst for justice and for truth illustrated throughout the seventh book and continually frustrated by the cleavage between social and natural, that is, true values. It also defines again society's moral liability for the consequences of the anomaly: the oppression of the weak by the strong who are armed with the prestige of wealth and high birth. That responsibility, which was very subtly implied in the prologue and clearly stated in the Venetian story, becomes more and more accentuated in the epilogue to prepare us for the forthcoming rebellion. More than anything else the above-cited text says explicitly and bluntly what the writer has already said figuratively and artistically everywhere in the book, namely that the violent explosion a few years later was an inevitable result of the past and particularly of the Venetian

¹ See L'Allée de Silvie in O.C., Pléiade, II, 1146, line 8.
² Ibid., I, 327:

La justice et l'inutilité de mes plaintes me laissèrent dans l'ame un germe d'indignation contre nos sotes institutions civiles où le vrai bien et la véritable justice sont toujours sacrifiés à je ne sais quel ordre apparent, destructif en effet de tout ordre, et qui ne fait qu'ajouter la sanction de l'autorité publique à l'oppression du foible et à l'iniquité du fort.
affair. If we have until now entertained any doubts at all about the value of that affair to the writer, this sentence hardly leaves us the possibility of denying it in good faith, unless we reject his own candid testimony. Of course we are always free to do so, but we should hardly be justified in the present case, since his statement is convincingly illustrated in impressive scenes and confirmed by a large body of evidence, including contemporary documents like the *Venetian Letters*.

**THE ALTUNA-THÉRÈSE PARADOX**

Before he relives the tedious years the memorialist contrasts the disillusionment of actuality with a vision of perfection that is the very source and object of all his restless longing. What he now calls his “love of justice and of beauty” is embodied in a sublime portrait of the “virtuous Altuna” of the Venetian story. The young Rousseau dwells with him on the fashionable Saint-Honoré street shortly after the return to Paris and until the following spring. This portrait, like Zulietta’s, and Montaigu’s too by way of contrast, becomes part of the slowly evolving self-portrait of *Les Confessions*. The picture is full of symbolism and charged with meaning. Even the name, which in the book differs from the Spanish original, has symbolic implications. This Altuna, created by the author, is not Manuel Ignacio like the man of flesh and blood that was his model in life, but Ignacio Emmanuel de Altuna. If this is an error, as the historians tell us, it is a happy one.³ On the other hand it may well be an indication of artistic dispositions in the writer who gradually broadens the scope of ideas suggested by the names. The given names proclaim the

³ For historical research on the young Rousseau’s Spanish friend see Ritter, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Notes diverses) III. Don Manuel-Ignacio Altuna,” *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, III (1907), 190–191. See also XXII (1933), 244–245 of the *Annales*. There is also a note in *C.G.*, V, 373; see also errata in *C.G.*, VI, 384. The most important information now available is given in *O.C.*, Pléiade, I, 1405 n1 (to p. 328), and *C.C.*, II, 77.
Spanish Catholic: Ignacio; who is truly Christian: Emmanuel, “the God who is with us.” The surname is too close to the Spanish “altura” meaning loftiness or summit, even the height of heaven itself, for the reader not to establish a psychological link, which is also a source of aesthetic pleasure. The portrait in Les Confessions is a tribute to all the virtues of mind and heart and soul. The young student’s unswerving pursuit of learning is the goal of Rousseau himself for whom, we are told, the arts divorced from knowledge can never satisfy a noble nature. In this ideal Altuna of his choice, the writer astonishes us by honoring charity, chastity, and the sanctity of marriage, without a trace of his usual skepticism; he extols angelic piety, miraculously reconciled with tolerance for the faith of others or their faithlessness. At last he depicts the tall, fair form, temple of a lofty spirit. Every detail suggests an ideal, one which he obviously finds unattainable in what he considers a disorderly society, but for which he affects to yearn all the more ardently. With this elusive phantom of his dreams, the hero of the book builds castles in Spain to replace those at the Charmettes, evoked in the opening pages but now vanished with the chatelaine, “mamma,” and plans to retire to a remote estate beyond the Pyrenees, there to dwell in a perfect world of his own imagining. Events separate him forever from the alter ego of his desires. The writer concludes helplessly that the innocent intentions of the good are seldom or never accomplished. This means that the good are those with good but often unfulfilled intentions, and by this standard the indolent Rousseau counts himself among their number. His best intentions and the professed object of his quest in life are incarnate in Altuna of Les Confessions.

The same idealism is to be found in Emile, where the youth’s first and only love is Sophie, while, for her part, Sophie seeks a lover who will be a life-long master. Their marriage is therefore envisaged as an indissoluble bond (O.C., Hachette, II, 375–376, 447).

O.C., Pléiade, I, 279–280.
The form that emerges from these pages of the autobiography is completely and very subjectively transfigured. It is not merely transcribed from life, for it bears only a vague resemblance to the historical model glimpsed in contemporary letters. In truth, there is an abyss between them, and the dissimilarity can hardly be explained by any but artistic and psychological motives on the part of the writer, certainly not by those of an apologist or by a defective memory, which would have robbed the portrait of intensity. Rather, if we compare the portrait in the book with available documentation upon its origins in actuality, we see once again what happens to the latter when absorbed into the artist’s world. For example, in a letter that Rousseau wrote to Madame de Warens on February 25, 1745, only a few months after his return to Paris, he speaks warmly enough of the “good and generous” Spanish friend whose Parisian abode he is sharing for a time but whose invitation to make a new life together in Spain he has no serious thought of accepting. The letter writer’s expressed plan for the present is to remain in society, to prove his worth and win esteem in defiance of the ambassador, but he fondly caresses his old illusion of ending his days with “mamma.” It is she who, so he alleges, still represents, however unconvincingly, his persistent inclination to withdraw. This view is reinforced by the absence of correspondence with the young Spaniard, even though there is a dearth in Rousseau’s letters at the time of their association.

---

6 C.C., II, 74. The writer says: “Ce bon et généreux ami est un gentilhomme Espagnol assez à son aise, qui me presse d’accepter un azile dans sa maison, pour y philosopher ensemble le reste de nos jours. Quelque conformité de gouts et de sentiments qui me lie à lui, je ne le prend point au mot, et je vous laisse à deviner pourquoi?” Although he was staying with Altuna when this letter was written, he apparently did not do so immediately upon his return to Paris, since in the last of the Venetian Letters, dated October 11, he gave his address as the Hôtel d’Orléans near the Palais Royal.

7 The period in Rousseau’s adult life for which the correspondence furnishes fewest letters is 1746–1749. We have one letter by him or addressed to him between December 11, 1745, and June 30, 1748, or, if the latter is apocryphal, August 26, 1748. It is to Mme de Warens, significantly enough, and is dated December 17, 1747.
are no letters at all from Altuna, and there is only one addressed by Rousseau to his friend. It is dated June 30, 1748, three years after their separation in Paris, and its authenticity has been questioned. It refers regretfully to their common hopes for the future as something unrealizable, partly because the man to whom the letter is addressed is bigoted and intolerant, and the very opposite of the liberal-minded figure in the memoirs.

It makes no matter what the friendship was in actuality. In the work of art, the author uses it to express in imagery an intense and oft-recurring mood, the temptation to turn his back upon the world. He has already conveyed this mood in the story of his removal from Chambéry for the first engagement with society, and again in the pages upon his journey to Venice for the second encounter. Now, as he faces the future again in retrospect, his friend is transformed into a beatific vision of justice and order, of intellectual and spiritual discipline that beckons the distraught and demoralized individual to abandon a corrupt society and take refuge in a nostalgic dream of happiness embodying the desire for the good life in blessed seclusion. The Altuna of Les Confessions belongs to ivory towers or mirages that take shape in desert solitudes, far from the haunts of men. There the new Alcèste longs to abide, he who would love all men and live with them, if only they were perfect. But, alas, they are no more perfect than the man who meekly relegates his most noble desires to the

---

8 C.G., I, 282–284; V, 373; VI, 384. See also C.C., II, 377–378. The authenticity of the letter is defended by Julio de Urquijo in Los Amigos del País (San Sebastián: Impronta de la Diputación de Guipuzcoa, 1929), pp. 7–17. It is also defended by L. J. Courtois in Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau, XXII (1933), 244–245. Affirmative evidence is: (1) Altuna was in Azcoitia when the letter was written; (2) the writer sends good wishes for Altuna’s forthcoming marriage which took place eleven months later; (3) there are similarities between the letter and that of August 26, 1748, from Rousseau to Mme de Warens. As Mr. Leight points out, this evidence merely shows that the possibility of the letter’s authenticity cannot be excluded. However he considers it apocryphal (C.C., II, 378–379). Altuna is named in an earlier letter from Rousseau to M. Duplessis at Nantes, September 14, 1745 (ibid., pp. 87–88).
realm of what might have been. And so the sublime creature of his fancy vanishes beyond the bounds of France, beyond the Pyrenees to the empyrean, never to emerge into the world of things.

In the pages of his book the ideal is immediately contrasted with the sorry facts of reality. The autobiographer takes leave of Altuna and their dreams of life together to make confession of the young Rousseau's liaison with the illiterate servant, Thérèse Le Vasseur, with whom he actually did live for the rest of his life, and this will explain his later conviction that a man who thinks should not take to wife a woman who does not. Only many years later did he marry her in a formal ceremony and, even then, he did so by way of a mere declaration made in the presence of witnesses. He was, incidentally, ten years older than Thérèse, who was the same age as Altuna. If, in *Les Confessions*, Altuna gives visible form to an obsession all the more enticing after the Venetian tragedy, Thérèse mirrors pathetically the desolation of actuality, attributed directly to the former secretary's disenchantment. At the beginning and end of the sordid story, we are insistently reminded of his blighted ambitions in the diplomatic service, ambitions born of social circumstances and killed by the same means. It is as though the writer would convince himself and us that this liaison, like the affair with Zulietta, is an excusable attempt to find compensation in the sentiments of the heart for the enforced renunciation of a brilliant future. Again he would show the tragic consequences of

---


10 O.C., Pléiade, I, 329: before telling the story he contemplates the disadvantages of dependence upon others: “Ayant vu renverser dès leur naissance les projets d’ambition que l’occasion m’avait fait former, rebuté de rentrer dans la carrière que j’avoy si bien commencée, et dont néanmoins je venois d’être expulsé ... ” After the confession, p. 331, he writes: “Il me fallloit à la place de l’ambition extéinte un sentiment viv qui remplit mon coeur.” In the same paragraph he adds: “Il fallloit que la douceur de la vie privée et domestique me dédommageât du sort brillant auquel je renongois. Quand j’étoyais absolument seul mon coeur etoy vide, mais il n’en fallloit qu’un pour le remplir.” Cf. p. 413.
social injustice. The tableau is a masterly one, and cleverly, or insidiously as a moralist would say, presents the embittered young man as a victim, not of his weakness, which is so skillfully revealed to us, but of the social conditions to which that weakness is ascribed. Deprived of Altuna’s companionship sometime about March, 1745, he returns to the left bank hotel of the period before the Venetian engagement. There he befriends the ignorant laundress and finds consolation in her, he who only two years before had objected to dining with Madame de Beuzenwal’s servants. This astonishing and reciprocal affection has its origin in his defense of the girl against the indecency and brutality of their social environment. Once more society is held responsible and stands condemned, while the individual is acquitted upon the grounds of extenuating circumstances, in spite of his obvious involvement. The writer excuses his hero while accusing him. Indeed there follows an avowal of personal guilt, but it is conveyed most subtly, or from a moral viewpoint, evasively. It is Thérèse who makes confession of a previous “fault,” imputed to her ignorance and the art of a seducer. Since this is precisely her present plight, the autobiographer again implicates society to exonerate the real seducer in these scenes of Les Confessions by contending characteristically that in Paris virginity can hardly be expected at twenty. This is the man who has just been vaunting the chastity of Altuna, but of course here he is depicting another world altogether. As a last resort to justify the young transgressor, he proffers the plea of past education: did not Madame de Warens create the void in his heart, a void all the vaster now that the lamp of his hopes is quenched in darkness? Again the writer points an accusing finger at society. Clearly he means to relieve the individual of responsibility by tracing the origins of this strange attachment to social disorder and the Venetian catastrophe, and he would enlist the sympathy or complicity of his readers by persuading them to do the same.
Yet in these very pages he remains a consummate artist true to his purpose. The literary contrast between Thérèse and Altuna is artistically admirable. It is also a valuable chapter in the story of the soul. It betrays extraordinary lucidity on Rousseau’s part, not about other people but about himself and the conflict within him between the dream and life, between aspirations to purity on the one hand and the compromise of existence upon the other. If Altuna is his most noble self, the one that God or nature made, Thérèse is the creature fashioned by men, as the writer of *Emile* would say. The memorialist undeniably portrays in her, moral or immoral dispositions that answer to those of his youth at this moment in time, and that consequently betray his own inner life in the past rather than hers. Again he sees himself in the nature of his attachments.¹¹ Not unlike Narcissus, he contemplates himself, as he once was, in the object of his affections and manifests himself in and through her, as he had done in Zulietta. But what an immense gulf there is between the dazzling Zulietta and the pallid form of Thérèse! If in the one we saw an image of genius debased by society, in the other we see a man bereft of his genius by the same agent which has left a very ordinary mortal in its train. The sad figure of the servant in the book is meant to be a faithful reflection of the young Rousseau’s spontaneous reaction to disgrace, of his inadequacy in the face of social rejection, and his complacent submission to the sordidness of life in a wretched setting. Her eyes with their remarkable animation resemble his own,¹² and his nature matches hers as they are

¹¹ See p. 135 n 157, above. Rousseau admits in a note that there are exceptions but adds that in referring to these exceptions he does not intend any injurious application to his wife. He says that she is more ignorant (bornée) and more easily deceived than he had believed but insists that her pure, excellent character, quite exempt from malice, is worthy of all his esteem.

¹² The reader is reminded of Narcisse (Valère) in Rousseau’s comedy who, falling in love with a portrait of himself arrayed as a woman, admires the eyes especially which, he observes in the third scene, resemble his own. He says to the servant Frontin: “Voilà d’honneur la plus jolie figure que j’aie vue de ma vie. Quels yeux, Frontin! ... je crois qu’ils ressemblent aux miens” (O.C., Pléiade, II, 984).
both depicted: sensitive, timid, self-conscious, quite unprepared to cope with the injustice of life and its brutality. Exactly as in the Zulietta scenes he is the seducer and the seduced, the betrayer and the betrayed, abased by the archfiend society to its own level of abasement and then implicated in its guilt. This liaison, as eternized in Les Confessions, is a powerful manifestation of his own moral frailty and indolence in the wake of the Venetian tragedy, which leads him to retreat without a struggle, not only from the ideals framed in the person of Altuna but from objective reality too, and then to take refuge in the nether world of the senses and sensations. The last Venetian experiences in the master work anticipate this capitulation of the individual to equivocal social or anti-social pressures, implying a denunciation of modern society and a vindication of its supposed dupes. Just as he was led to the Padoana by Vitali, as Zulietta was brought to him by Olivet, and as Anzoletta was discovered and proposed to him by Carrió, so he and Thérèse are represented as helplessly thrown together by an evil society. In all these scenes he gradually assumes the martyr’s role. Each one of them plainly shows the sentimental infirmity of the youth who succumbs and of the writer who, like a father confessor, absolves him but whose absolution does not make the confession less lucid and frank. What is less obvious, perhaps by reason of its utter perfection of form, is that this portrayal of moral weakness is proof of rare artistic strength. From the carefully delineated conflict between the soul and life there gradually emerges the true shape of the soul, expressing itself pallidly in the life of a man but intensely in the work of his genius. This is particularly true of the Altuna-Thérèse paradox, which is the very crux of Rousseau’s inner drama, presented here in the heart of Les Confessions.

13 Rousseau finally concluded that the only defense against his moral vulnerability was to retreat to a much simpler society than the one in the midst of which he had become involved in guilt, an idea connected with the thesis of La Morale sensitive planned at the Hermitage (ibid., I, 409).
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHER'S EPILOGUE

In the last pages of the seventh book Montaigu's victim rouses himself once more from his lethargy to challenge society to a new engagement, corresponding harmoniously with that of the inventor of ciphered music three years earlier. His creative gifts are suddenly stirred to new life by the power of musical inspiration fostered in Venice. In the summer of 1745 he completes the ballet, *Les Muses galantes*, begun before his appointment to the diplomatic service. Thus he antagonizes Rameau, who had, as we have seen, detected the real flaw in the cipher system. The eminent master's supposed jealousy of the young dilettante is used to externalize, in a single set of images, not only proof of the latter's natural talent but also evidence of society's reluctance to accept it and hostility toward the artist. In the image sequence Rameau discredits *Les Muses galantes* and, through his powerful patrons, intrigues to prevent it from being given at Versailles. He also discredits its author's work on *Les Fêtes de Ramire*, an opera of Voltaire and Rameau adapted by Rousseau to a fresh theme at the Duke de Richelieu's request, and with Voltaire's written approval.14 The great musician is shown revising the new adaptation and then suppressing his own name on the program of the public performance rather than include Rousseau's. Although historical research tells us that Rousseau's overture to *Les Fêtes de Ramire* was not retained as he believed, his work on the opera was fairly extensive, judging by the payment he was intended to

---

14 For Voltaire's letter of approval, dated December 15, 1745, and transcribed in Book VII of *Les Confessions*, see ibid., I, 335-336. He excuses the flaws in his work on the grounds that it was done in a wink, although in fact it took him ten months; see p. 1410 n1 (to p. 335). Cf. *C.C.*, II, 94-95, as well as 92-93, containing Rousseau's request for permission dated December 11. The two men probably met just once, some five years later in Mme de Graffigny's salon; see Edmond Bruwaert, "Madame de Graffigny et Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *Revue hebdomadaire*, VIII (August 30, 1924), 567-592.
receive but never did. Was it to conceal this work and to avoid acknowledging his collaboration with illustrious contemporaries that all three author's names were, by an unprecedented measure, omitted from the program of the December, 1745, performance, even that of the proverbially vain Voltaire? The author of *Les Confessions* thought the latter was named. This error is probably not proof that the autobiographer's misanthropy is poisoning the fruits of the emotional memory, or that the same obsession is already present in the young composer.

In contemporary correspondence Rousseau records his real vexations, at least those to which *Les Muses galantes* gave rise. Probably he was moved to resume the work partly through a desire, expressed by Altuna's guest in the February message to "mamma," to vindicate himself against the ambassador by proving that he was both more estimable and more esteemed than his former employer. He was also counting upon the ballet to relieve his extreme financial distress. Upon completing it on July 9, 1745, he wrote to Monsieur Roguin, a friend in Paris. In the letter he says that since he has had no response from Montaigu, presumably to written appeals no longer extant or to those sent to the Foreign Office, his only resource against poverty is this work, born of an afflicted, melancholy spirit. Yet he dreads the struggle to win recognition for it. In fact he is so weary of the society of men that only the law of honor can detain him among them until his debts are paid.

Two months later in another letter, addressed to an acquaintance in Nantes, he testifies to his dismay and consternation when he is cheated of all his hopes through Rameau's opposition to the ballet. The famous man's animosity and brutality are manifest in accusations of

---


16 C.C., II, 84–85.
plagiary directed against Rousseau's work and also in various intrigues to prevent performances of it from being given at Paris and Versailles. A passage in the letter reads:

Do you know that my ballet is finished, that I had to have it performed at Madame de la Popelinière's (Rameau's patroness), that Rameau was there? That my music put him in a bad mood, that he declares it is too good to be mine . . . and that, instead of his zealous partisan as I have always been, I shall find myself the victim of his brutality if no one intervenes . . . I should long since have been free of all this if my ballet had been given at Versailles, as was proposed: but again I found Rameau in my way, and he would also like to stop it from being given in Paris; I have never seen such intrigue and animosity in all my life. My head spins . . . I take courage just the same; the fury of my enemies has shown me my strength.17

The turbulent emotions, so convincingly rendered in the correspondence, are revived in Les Confessions, where however the writer develops more concretely the idea of the last sentence quoted above. In the book Rameau's jealousy is used to prefigure the younger man's creative powers and to persuade us that in their birth they could arouse the envy of the bulwark of French music but could win the artist no grateful remembrance in the minds of men.

Les Muses galantes is little more than a pledge of the future, as its author knew. This is one reason why he withdrew it from the Paris opera after a dress rehearsal, another reason being the opposition of his adversaries, particularly Rameau, who ten years later even asserted that it had been rejected by the theater. Yet the score of the Hesiod act, which is the only one to survive, does hold promise, in spite of its mediocrity.18 Moreover even Voltaire, in his previously cited letter, remarks upon the rare combination of the gifts of music and verse in a single artist.

18 The promise was fulfilled in his opera of 1752, Le Devin du village.
If, as Rameau suspiciously observed, the Italian arias in the work were superior to the French music, the reason is to be sought not in plagiary on the composer's part but in his marked preference for the music of Italy, still resounding in his ear so shortly after the Venetian experience. The poetic themes of the libretto, briefly recorded in the memoirs just before the departure for Venice, cast even more light upon his inclinations after his return and reflect the liaison with Thérèse. They may be studied in the original text preserved in its entirety at Neuchâtel. The composer says quite freely in the lyrics that happiness in love may take the place of fame and greatness and even inspire the lover with the divine gift of music, won not by servile effort but by sovereign grace abounding in a pure and a tender heart. This tribute to the power of feeling is meant, not simply as a justification of the liaison, although it is that too, but rather as a reply to Rameau's attack on his untutored talents, for Rousseau was an autodidactic in music as in every sphere he entered. Another answer to criticism is to be found in his later musical writings. But the reply in Les Confessions is the most artistic of all. There Rameau himself becomes a symbol of his pretended victim's natural creative powers and their repudiation by the social order.

This third encounter with society is no happier than the other two, and in the autobiography the sequel is disaster, especially after a futile attempt to stage Narcisse. The young man entirely relinquishes the epic struggle against social decrees without even thinking yet of challenging them. He takes refuge again in the same "timidity, weak-

19 Rameau's judgment and the statement that the work had been rejected by the Paris opera are to be found in Erreurs sur la musique dans l'Encyclopédie (Paris: S. Jorry, 1755), p. 41.

20 Since the libretto refers to the liaison, and since the memorialist first discusses the work before the Venetian story, we might wonder whether the liaison dates originally from the demoralizing period following the failure of his system of ciphered music. Yet the date 1745 seems to have greater historical support: O.C., Pléiade, I, 1406 n2 (to p. 330), and also p. cv.
ness and indolence" which he had deplored when he was first moved to compose the ballet, just before leaving for Venice. Again he suffers illness, poverty, and the subjection of his natural talents to tyrannical social demands, which are depicted as virtually suppressing the individual. Presumably some time in 1745 he accepts an appointment as secretary to Madame Dupin, her husband, and her stepson, Dupin de Francueil, to serve their intellectual ambitions at the expense of his own. Thereupon we are carried back to the dreary days of their mutual association before the Venetian tragedy. The dull procession of events laboriously resumes its slow progress. Rousseau removes to the right bank to be close to his patrons and allows his life to be quite absorbed in theirs. In three years he produces only two trivial literary compositions, excluding the play Les Prisonniers de guerre, which he finishes at this time but which dates mostly from the glorious Venetian days. The autobiographer refers to it at this stage in his memoirs, but does so in a footnote, probably because the theme of the piece is not related to the spiritual character of the period of its completion. It hardly blends with the tone of lassitude which is the keynote of his reminiscences in these pages.

The other two works mentioned briefly in the same pages are a comedy and a poem. They help to reconstruct a little known phase in the contemporary history of the writer's inner life. Both were composed at the Dupin country home, the castle of Chenonceaux, which once belonged to Francis I and also to Diane de Poitiers. Rousseau spent the summer there in 1746 and 1747 performing chemistry experiments in Francueil's laboratory.

\[21\] For the literary and scientific work that Rousseau did for Mme Dupin and Francueil see O.C., Pléiade, I, 1413–1414 nn1 and 3 (to p. 342). At least a year before this period and probably almost immediately upon his return to Paris from Venice, while he was with Altuna, he had been pursuing his experiments in chemistry: C.C., II, 74–75. The Institutions chimiques that resulted was published in the Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau, XII (1918–1919), 1–164; XIII (1920–1921), 1–178. It was drawn up later.
and preparing the *Institutions chimiques*, ignored in the autobiography. The comedy, *L'Engagement téméraire*, dates from the autumn of 1747. It reflects the formal pattern of life in the Dupin household and also the author's readings of Marivaux, Molière, and Racine. More especially, it lays bare his spiritual dilemma at the time of composition, since his state of soul is portrayed in the person of a young lover, Dorante. Again the experience of love is used to express that of life. As a test of his devotion Dorante agrees to renounce briefly the right to manifest his sentiments. This pact is not more "temerarious" than the playwright's own "engagement," set forth in *Les Confessions*, to surrender his intellectual aspirations and place himself at the disposal of his patrons. The play is valuable as contemporary evidence of Rousseau's moods in real life. So is the poem, *L'Allée de Sylvie*, which dates exactly a year before the play, and is more personal. Yet it says nothing that we may not read in the libretto of *Les Muses galantes*. It shows the writer seeking solace for his "sad and slow career" in the pleasures of the heart, which he rationalizes and defends to include them in his view of virtue and wisdom. Together the poem and the play provide a commentary on the state of mind of the Dupin secretary in real life.

These two compositions help to fill in an historical gap created by lack of correspondence at this time. We have only one letter written by Rousseau in a period of two and one half years, between December 11, 1745, and June 30 or more probably August 26, 1748. It is addressed to Madame de Warens in December, 1747, and is ominously uninformative about the writer who, so he says, desists from arousing compassion by a recital of his distress. The letter of the following August contains an illuminating passage. It reads: "I am always hoping that this period will not last forever. I wish I had some safe way of opening my heart to you about my real situation. I have the greatest

---

need of your advice. I exhaust my mind and my strength in efforts to behave wisely in these difficult circumstances and, if possible, to rise above this state of ignominy and poverty." 23 These shreds of evidence appear as odd pieces of our historical picture puzzle which remains incomplete and enigmatic to the very end. In fact contemporary documents do little more than foreshadow vaguely the picture of utter passivity and spiritual quiescence that appears in the text of Les Confessions.

Surely no more striking admission of moral chaos has ever been made than the one Rousseau makes in the book. The picture is consummated by a tragic story of children born out of wedlock and entrusted to the public hostel in both 1746 and 1748. But again the writer absolves his hero. More than twenty years after the event he traces this "fatal conduct" of his youth to the influence of acquaintances, that is to the social environment. We see the indolent dreamer meekly join the throng of "respectable people in society whose maxims bear a strong resemblance to those of knaves," but who are socially approved none the less. I quote here from La Lettre à d'Alembert, because Rousseau's bitterly ironical words in that piece bring out the meaning of a much misunderstood and frequently disputed passage of Les Confessions in the present context, which is similarly but more subtly ironical. Readers of this passage, overlooking the irony altogether, conclude that the autobiographer is being flippant to defend himself by alleging that honest people would condone such conduct as he describes. 24 The conclusion might seem justified by his allusion at this point to Francueil's conjugal infidelity and liaison with Madame d'Epinay, which might be taken as an example of analogous if not identical conduct. But in actual fact Rousseau is castigating

24 See, for example, Guéhenno, Jean-Jacques, I, 185–186; and the editors of O.C., Pléiade, I, 1416–1417. For the quotation from La Lettre à d'Alembert see O.C., Hachette, I, 203.
his favorite scapegoat, society. All these confessions imply a new indictment of social disorder with a view to exonerating the protagonist and presenting him as a victim of the environment. From a literary point of view the corresponding disorder of the individual’s life, which is none the less clearly delineated for the shift of responsibility to others, serves to portray the thraldom of the spirit and its inability to react or resist.

Yet his submission is deceptive and precarious. This is shown in his renewed relations with literary circles, including Condillac and especially Diderot. Together with Diderot he plans a periodical, *Le Persiflur*, to be composed alternately by the two friends. The first issue, sketched by Rousseau, has survived and is animated by an independence of spirit suggesting the he is about to shake off the yoke. In the journal he undertakes to criticize new publications with impartiality declaring that, although like most men he combines wisdom with folly, his greatest folly is the desire to consult only reason and tell nothing but the truth. There is somewhat of a challenge in these words.

The text of *Les Confessions* gives other evidence of imminent rebellion. Early in 1749 Diderot provides the young composer with an opportunity to make another foray into the field of music, inviting him to write the articles on music for the great encyclopedia. In life the young Rousseau pours forth his enthusiasm for this new venture in a triumphant letter to Madame de Warens, dated January 27 of the same year. This letter, which is all the more striking by comparison with the other of six months before telling only of illness, poverty, and degradation, contains a passage reminiscent of the autobiography at the beginning of the seventh book. The letter writer, like the memorialist, compares himself with Athenian captives who, after the defeat of Nicias at Syracuse, won their livelihood

---

25 O.C., Pléiade, I, 1103–1112 (text).
26 C.C., II, 112–113. For the letter to Mme Dupin mentioned below see pp. 115–116.
among their enemies by reciting songs, and in a similar way he hopes to subdue his adversaries with encyclopedia articles. If the articles were intended to be a new reply to Rameau, they hardly betray the fact in their present form, since they were edited and mitigated by Diderot's colleague d'Alembert and consequently show none of the high spirits reflected in the eloquence of the previously cited message to “mamma.” In a letter addressed to Madame Dupin four months later he seems more submissive again and even contemplates a position as counselor to the young Chenonceaux, who was soon to be married. But by the time the marriage took place Rousseau was already committed to his true vocation, and the “fire” with which he felt “kindled” could no longer be controlled. The author of *Les Confessions* would make us aware of this at the conclusion of the book we are discussing. There he conveys a sense of excitement and impatience by the increasingly rapid pace of the narrative, which contrasts sharply with the painfully slow gait so tastefully adopted in the beginning. The feeling of agitation reaches a climax when Diderot is suddenly imprisoned at Vincennes as a result of his provocative pen in the *Lettres sur les aveugles* and in earlier equally defiant pieces, beginning with the *Pensées philosophiques* some three years before. His friend's exultation turns to despair as the tragic story comes to an abrupt end. Hostile society, ominously present in the prying eyes and listening walls of the opening pages, and again in the failure of the young Rousseau's Parisian debuts, prevails anew. The very distortions of this vision of life are skillfully used to accentuate the sharpness of focus that distinguishes the self-portrait.

All these situations of *Les Confessions* give lucid form to Rousseau's youthful spirit, baffled by the inconsistency between his innate powers and his failure to find an outlet for them in life. Primed by years of experience, he pleads ardently for justice and truth, which he sees violated in the person of Diderot. He even writes a letter to Madame de
Pompadour which, by the way, has never come to light, begging her to procure the philosopher’s release or have the writer imprisoned with him. In the annals of the soul, the hero’s anguish has more meaning than a simple sign of friendship, however devoted. His friend’s situation is not intrinsically very different from that of the happy hermit of the lazaret who had contentedly established himself for a quarantine as he might have done for a lifetime. But the implications are as dissimilar as his own responses. Diderot becomes for him the symbol of natural genius in bonds fashioned by the archenemy, society. Rousseau, uniting himself with the prisoner in mind and heart and soul, is, at least in his own eyes, a bondsman of the same master. As usual, the event is impressively used in the autobiography to echo his personal prejudices and feelings. The passion for liberty, bursting forth in the violence of his protests, recalls the fine freedom of earlier days, when Diderot first befriended a young man recently come to Paris in the fond hope of startling the world with a new system of musical notation.

\[O.C., \textit{Pleiade}, I, 296: "... comme un nouveau Robinson je me mis à m’arranger pour mes vingt-un jours comme j’aurais fait pour toute ma vie."\]