Rousseau's Venetian Story
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Conclusion

Rousseau's turbulent reaction to Diderot's imprisonment leaves the reader of *Les Confessions* with the distinct impression that the Venetian drama, which fostered in the soul of the protagonist a fierce indignation against existing social institutions and a consuming desire for what he calls justice, is still a living force in his inner life. Yet five years have elapsed since that tragic experience which seemed fatal to the man no less than to the artist, preceded as it was by the unhappy Parisian debuts of the musical theorist and followed by the equally unhappy debuts of the aspiring composer. The memorialist represents the early effects of all these failures in the young man's capitulation to degrading social pressures which abase, suppress, and almost efface the individual enslaved to pretentious patrons. For a time it seems as if the "snowy" years have quite enveloped the Venetian disaster in a shroud of oblivion. Nothing could be further from the truth. Once all its potency had been fully felt and realized, it had to become firmly embedded in the subconscious and completely absorbed in the soul and in time before the real fruits could take root and grow and come to the birth. This is precisely what the aftermath, recorded in the seventh book of *Les Confessions*, is intended to disclose. The reader is thereby prepared for the abundant harvest that the future was to bring forth and to which the memorialist himself refers in other books of his work.
The study of all ramifications of Rousseau's Venetian experience is a vast area of scholarship that has yet to be explored. This essay deals with only one of them. However barren the affair seemed at the moment when he left the city of the doges empty-handed and unhonored if not disgraced, and however barren it apparently remained for years, yet in the end it proved on the contrary to be one of the most powerful generative forces in his life, productive of personal enrichment as well as honor and fame. In a position of prominence, his timid, introspective nature was temporarily drawn into contact with the world of men and things. The Venetian affair became for him a fruitful source of ideas, aspirations, sentiments, and images upon which he drew freely for the great works that abundantly endowed both himself and posterity and won him a place among the immortals. This is indicated in my introduction where I recreate the memorialist's point of view as he set about writing his story. In truth, the fecundity of that memorable year in the diplomatic service did not come to an end with Rousseau's life but is still giving proof of the most exuberant vitality in the history of literature and of thought. If that year sowed the seeds of the future for him, it did the same for us too, since it contained in germ some of the most essential ingredients of modern occidental civilization, embodied in works like *Du Contrat social*.

**TRUTH**

Not the least among the fruits of the Venetian adventure is the one that is the theme of this essay, the book of *Les Confessions*, where the story is magnificently told. Our collation of the text with contemporary evidence has shown that the author fully realizes his professed intentions. He promised us not his apology but his portrait: the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and particularly his inner being. Our analysis of one of the most controversial parts of the whole autobiography has
revealed that, although the seventh book has always been judged as apologetics, it has little value as such. This is partly because of Rousseau’s deliberate reticence in handling the most sensational material at his disposal. But it is mainly because of his success as a psychologist and introspective portraitist who entrusts himself unreservedly and even imprudently to his readers. Quite frankly looking at the world through his own temperament, through his personal passions and pride and prejudices, he records not merely events but their causes or effects within him and his feelings about them. Moreover he presents them with utter fidelity. Our collation confirms the veracity of his confidences. It does so in two ways. In the first place, it shows that the modifications of objective reality in the book falsify neither the soul nor events or any aspect of factual experience as these are known to us in contemporary documents. Secondly, it shows that these modifications are not arbitrary but have been imposed upon the writer by the literary form of his work.\footnote{1} He warns us about them himself, but his warnings have until now been ignored. He tells us openly that he uses events and his whole apprehension of life, including things and beings, to give artistic form to psychological truth and to incarnate in a series of pictures a succession of psychic states characteristic of himself in the past and relived in the present. All his images serve a purpose and they all serve the same purpose. In each one of them he uses his adventures and companions “to acquaint us fully with J.-J. Rousseau.” Thus the great situations and characters of the book give diaphanous form to his own shifting moods and frame of mind or heart, until all encounters of every kind become an integral part of the self-portrait.

We have observed that retouching is most noticeable in his use of other people to incarnate various facets of his own life and personality. Some of these blend smoothly

\footnote{1}{I have discussed these matters in my article, “In Defense of Literature,” to appear shortly in Studi Francesi.}
CONCLUSION

into the self-portrait, while others are used as elements of contrast to betoken a hostile society and its effects upon the protagonist. For example, the ambassador is magnified into a symbol of social injustice, while Rameau and Mesdames de Beuzenwal and Dupin represent the tyranny of arbitrary social decrees. On the other hand, the sympathetic figures, each personifying some aspect of the writer's character, merge quite naturally into the many-sided and composite “portrait of the artist as a young man,” for he is persuaded that everyone's true inclinations are shown in the nature of his attachments. These sympathetic characters are Zulietta, Altuna, Thérèse, and Diderot. In them he contemplates a reflection of himself with which he is as enchanted as Narcissus, significantly the theme of his first literary work, as we have remarked. This narcissism remains characteristic of him. He sees his future vocation and martyrdom in Diderot, the rejection of his genius in Zulietta, and in Thérèse the man whose genius has apparently deserted him and left him a prey to his weakness on the morrow of the Venetian catastrophe. Our analysis shows that these portraits are not historically and objectively true, any more than our own view of life and men can be entirely impersonal and impassive; much less so, since Rousseau does not have the pretension of presenting anyone else but himself, and he has given us fair warning more than once. The creatures of flesh and blood have undergone a certain transubstantiation and are intensified and deftly adapted to his theme to which they lend themselves perfectly, echoing his own tastes and inclinations.

To justify himself, he has the precedent of all great artists, whatever media they employ, including his Venetian and French contemporaries, who have left us such a rich legacy of plastic images and whose integrity we should hardly think of questioning, although they too portray the world reflected through their own temperaments. Consider the freedom of Guardi, for instance. What art
lover in Venice has not stood entranced before his “San Giorgio” in the Venetian academy and then walked away into the dazzling light to search out the artist’s viewpoint and gaze across at the tiny island in the sun? Only the most prosaic among us would reproach the artist for that transfiguration of the actual by the magic alchemy of art and accuse him of lying to us on the canvas. Do we not rather delight in the privilege of being admitted into the artist's world, of participating in his creative vision and responding to it? This is what we must do in the case of all art, if it is true that the artist’s function, whether he is a writer, painter, or musician, is to give new sight to the blind, to open the ears of the deaf, and to unseal the lips of the dumb. If we are willfully deaf-mute and blind, if we refuse to see, to heed, and to respond, then we can hardly be enlightened. In other words, in studying the imagery and eloquence of Rousseau's literary work we must be prepared for, and welcome, a transmutation of actuality conceived to incarnate spiritual truth, such as he announces quite bluntly in the Zulietta scenes. Once we understand that he is not transcribing the facts of existence but is giving symbolic form to the life of the soul as he proposed, then we also realize that he has achieved his object in Les Confessions. The problems of art and truth are inseparable.

ART

We may now conclude that art for Rousseau is, as he says in one of our epigraphs, a means for the manifestation of truth in the classical sense. It is therefore not surprising that the quality of his book which our collation has most frequently brought to light is its realism, external as well as internal. But it is surprising that there are so few discrepancies between a work of art and the records of its source material in life. After all, the two bodies of writings deal primarily with a different order of things, the one circumstantial and the other psychological. They have a com-
pletely dissimilar object and employ quite divergent modes of expression, the book being a literary and artistic transposition of the historical fact. We find ourselves wondering how it is that, in a creative work existing in its own right, quite apart from the incidents inspiring it, the author has not distorted actuality in order to communicate his personal view of life in a suitable, harmonious form. How has he succeeded in giving us an imaginative vision of events and in transforming them to suit his purpose without deforming them? How has he contrived to enhance historical truth and to throw it into relief through the resources of his art without ever sacrificing it? The solution of these questions is to be sought in the peculiar quality of his imagination, and also in the specific modes of artistic composition that he uses to impose form upon the stream of existence. Both methods must be clear to us if we are to understand how he reconciles artistic intentions with the pursuit of reality, as we have seen him do over and over again, throughout the Venetian story.

The historical authenticity of a book depends more upon the imagination than upon other artistic processes. If the writer gives free play to his creative imagination and power of invention, then the historical validity of his work might be dubious except as evidence of his romanticism. If, on the other hand, he engages the intuitive imagination, then far from distorting facts and events he extorts from them all their fullness of meaning without substantially altering them except to organize, synthetize, simplify, or even transpose them in the interests of spiritual truth and aesthetic harmony. Which form of imagination does Rousseau adopt in *Les Confessions*? His theme is admittedly romantic in conception, and his inspiration is partly so. Like the great romantics he uses the sentimental memory to recapture situations that serve as a point of departure for his work, with the result that the greatest scenes are the most deeply emotional moments in life. Nevertheless his method is not entirely romantic, as our collation has
proved. In exploring these emotional crises and presenting them to the reader, he curbs his imagination and has recourse to intuition and the most penetrating and ruthless introspection to discover the truth within himself and to reveal it in the ordinary things of life. This can be verified even in the most dramatic scenes, like the love scene with Zulietta with its almost cynically realistic overtones. He spares neither his vanity nor pride, dignity nor modesty. In fact, morally speaking his shamelessness is shocking and unsavory, at the same time as it is essential to the examination of conscience he proposes. This is why the dictum of *Emile* that “the lies of modesty are worth more than truth” could not be applied by the autobiographer. The latter shows the same love for what is true whether it makes him look ridiculous or heroic, virtuous or vicious. This is so in spite of all his alibis, repudiations, and excuses. The fact that he absolves himself at the expense of society and is convinced that confession of his faults is better than innocence itself does not make the confession any the less searching and genuine. His predilection for truth was fostered first by Plutarch and possibly also by his Calvinist conscience and by his varied religious experience. But probably it was also an intrinsic part of his nature, inducing him to expose his soul, with all its taints and blemishes, to the eyes of the whole world. Whatever its origin, his intellectualized method leads him to unfold not merely the impassioned impulse that was the mainspring of his inspiration but his whole personality and innermost being as well: *intus, et in cute* (inside and beneath the skin), as he says in the epigraph of *Les Confessions*. Furthermore, though he promises to reveal no man but himself, as usual he gives much more than he promises. He goes far beyond the eccentricities of his own individuality and, without exposing any other individual, he plumbs such depths within himself that he reaches the universal and eternal traits of human nature. In other words, his disciplined imagination transforms his romantic theme
into a classical one, whose truth transcends both time and place. The same faculty safeguards in addition the historical integrity of his work.

The historical authenticity of *Les Confessions* is not marred either by the writer’s need to impose form upon the phenomena of existence for the sake of achieving orderly arrangement, proportion, balance, and harmonious design. Again our collation has brought this out in a remarkable way. In the seventh book, for instance, we have seen him use such contrivances as rhythmic alternation of themes, paradox and parallelism, symmetry, antithesis and artistic synthesis, without significantly altering the facts and circumstances that are transposed from life. There is, we have observed, alternation between the dreamer’s aspiration to solitude and the active man’s desire for social prestige, and again between ambition and submission; there is paradox inherent in the position of an alien in the French diplomatic service; there is parallelism and contrast too between the “heroic” Venetian scenes and ensuing mortalities; there is antithesis between the ambassador and his secretary; there are at least two, and perhaps even three, fine examples of artistic synthesis, that is, the fusing of a host of actual events into a single composite one, for instance in the message to Naples, possibly in the Veronese story, and certainly in the farewell scene at the palace of the legation. In the same farewell scene the matter of the account has been eliminated and then transposed into other contexts, so that the last scene at the embassy might not be falsified psychologically. These devices, designed to satisfy the demands of art and inner reality, have been exhaustively illustrated in our analysis and explain the minor discrepancies between the memoirs and objective documents. They are found in all art of every period, including classical and romantic. Strangely enough, Rousseau’s peculiar mode of applying them is classical rather than romantic, and that is why they do not affect the historical validity of his narrative. For example, his use of antithesis,
paradox, and parallelism is utterly simple and natural. The reader must stop and reflect in order to become aware of it at all. It is therefore not in the least studied, self-conscious, or exaggerated, as in the case of romantic writers. The same may be said of his symbolic use of persons, situations, and especially love scenes to lay bare his soul. Although he does not present them objectively, he never forcibly projects his moods into them, but rather quite naturally sees in the persons or things depicted the causes or effects of his moods, which are consequently evoked by them. Thus visible forms in the book correspond perfectly to the truth he has promised to divulge, a truth so deeply subjective that it finally becomes human in its range and realism. Once he has expressed it, he says no more.

The economy, or rather austerity, of his narration is singularly observable in the Venetian story and brought to our attention by a comparison with archives. He might have included a great many startling tales that history has brought to light. Instead he has mitigated the embassy scandals in his account of them. If, as we strongly suspect, he has done so for the sake of psychological verisimilitude, the advantages are far from being exclusively psychological. They are artistic too. The imagery is saved from ostentation. In fact, throughout Les Confessions, it remains unobtrusive and discreetly employed, showing rare self-control on the part of the writer. This artistic mastery and literary discipline often serve to discover the moral anarchy of the man which is all the more striking for that. Consequently, spiritual being, either well ordered or in a state of disarray, is not in the least overshadowed by superfluous or sensational details. Rather it is completely or, if you prefer, immodestly disclosed in the great moments of the writer's life, which are also those of our "human condition," even if we are unwilling to admit it.

Rousseau's success in reconciling art and inner truth, and in respecting the objective facts of history too, is therefore
fully demonstrated in our study of art and truth in the Venetian story. Like the great classics, and especially Plutarch, he has taken his material from life without essentially altering it to fulfill his avowed intention, which is to manifest a man to the world in a work of enduring artistic and spiritual significance. Although the man is himself and the initial purpose is therefore romantic, if a real romantic had written the story, any resemblance it might have borne to the circumstances inspiring it would have been purely coincidental. As it is, the story is very close to history.

Yet the circumstantial validity of the narrative does not determine or explain the essential truth and beauty of the work, or unveil the secrets of the writer’s prestige. Nor does the relative truth or falsehood of his ideas, which are often mere platitudes or brilliant restatements of contemporary prejudices. The real virtue of his work consists in his use of ideas, events, and personalities for the perfect portrayal of life in himself and in humanity, of states of soul that are totally and eternally true. From a series of tableaux there gradually evolves an authentic picture of himself of such compelling truth and absolute conviction that he has become more familiar to us than any other modern writer and is known to the world by his Christian name, like Dante and the great artists of the past. This is not merely because he solicits our complicity in his work, for every true artist does that. It is because he is intimately known to us. It is also because, so exhaustively and relentlessly does he probe into his spirit that he even probes into our own and reveals us to ourselves. His nature is ours, whether we recognize it and like it or not. He reveals what every man conceals carefully, not only from others but even from his own consciousness. By Rousseau we gain a fuller knowledge of ourselves and of mankind “and grow wise at the expense of the dead.”

But the satisfaction he provides is not only spiritual and intellectual. It is also literary and aesthetic and comes from
a classical correspondence between his vision of character
and its cloak of imagery, its embodiment in persons, places,
and events. Once we become conscious of the universal
truth of the book and the perfect choice of forms to envelop
that truth, their utter suitability to perform their predeter-
mined function, then we begin to realize the beauty of the
work. We do so even if the truth it conveys be distasteful
and unflattering in itself, for the beauty of art and litera-
ture does not depend upon beauty of subject, except for
those who lack maturity of judgment. In the same way, we
may respond to a portrait of that other great precursor
among autobiographers, Rembrandt, and find it true and
beautiful, even though the sitter be ugly and no more true
or false than the rest of us. It is the brilliance of the por-
traiture that holds us spellbound as we muse, and leaves us
richer for the musing: the consummate artistry with which
the human spirit is clothed in visible form and given life and
animation, so that its most abstract modes of being appear
as living shapes for our pleasure and enlightenment. To
experience this we need not be enamored of the artist as a
man, any more than Boileau was enamored of monsters
when he wrote the opening lines of the greatest canto of
his *Art poétique*. There he says that any serpent or ugly
monster may delight the eye in the imitations of art, for
the pleasing craftsmanship of a refined and sensitive brush
—he might have said pen—can make the most hideous
things attractive or charming, and therefore beautiful.²
The same may be said of the flaws and faults of men as
depicted in the great works of portraiture.

It is not inappropriate to quote the *Art poétique* here.
We have seen that Rousseau’s expressed literary profession
of faith is classical. At the end of the fourth book of *Emile*,

² Boileau, *Art poétique*, Chant III, vss. 1-4:
Il n’est point de serpent ni de monstre odieux,
Qui, par l’art imité, ne puisse plaire aux yeux:
D’un pinceau délicat l’artifice agréable
Du plus affreux objet fait un objet aimable.
Rousseau read Boileau at the Charmettes in 1736; see C.C., I, 38.
the writer, full of admiration for Plutarch and the ancients, declares that the judgments of taste, which are really a function of common sense, can be cultivated only by the study of nature and of truth. The external aspects of both in Les Confessions are in fact flawless reflections of the soul, and this is precisely what critics have failed to see in the past. Rousseau's artistic realism and depth of psychology, which are unique in the eighteenth century, are clearly part of the legacy of classicism. This bequest is visible at once in his clear, simple, natural utterance, and in his controlled use of the traditional resources of art to enhance the eminently human substance of his work. He combines the universal truth and formal simplicity of the classics, of whom he is the heir, with the intimately personal themes and emotional inspiration of the romantics, whom he foreshadows, so that the great conflict of two opposing ideologies and art forms is centered in his person, in his thought, and in his work. The impact is most powerfully felt in this book, where the theme is quite frankly the object of Pascal’s anathema, the self. But the writer soothes his classical literary conscience by his reverence for the truth, as he humbles himself before it and then pursues it through the mysterious domain of the soul. The perfect likeness he captures and fixes faithfully for all eternity is the portrait bust that survives the city where it took its form. And the city? It is Geneva, and Paris, and others too, but it is also Venezia.

3 It is significant that, in other books of Les Confessions where Rousseau draws attention to his creative (romantic) imagination, either in life or literary work, he always makes a lucid distinction between the “ideal” world and the “real” world: see, for example, Books IV and IX (O.C., Pléiade, I, 159–160; 427–428).