

and persecution - had worked for both good and ill - that origin too must be suitably ambiguous. Rousseau has in fact undergone an experience of conversion, an Augustinian 'turn'. His own preferred term for it was of a momentary 'illumination', a description recalling the 'great light' witnessed by the unregenerate Saul on the Damascus road, but promissory also of the new career of didacticism to which Rousseau was about to turn, as an agent furthering the spread of enlightenment. The scene is well known. Rousseau like Saul is on the road, on the way from Paris to Vincennes, to encourage his friend Diderot, who has been incarcerated there by order of the king for the 'intemperateness' of his materialist ideas. The themes of exile and of punishment are well found for Rousseau, as yet projected on to his progress. The deeper pleasure would come from being free to arrest its progress.

The 'conversion' of a life into a story means passing from the ardent immediacy of experience to the cool mediacy of language, or from feeling to thought. This transition may well be seen as imitating that which we all of us make as individuals as we mature, in a personal recapitulation à la Vico of the history of our species. For Rousseau in particular it recapitulates the evolution of language, or that institution which distinguishes man from beast and has, for good or ill, made progress inevitable. In the *Essai sur l'Origine des Langues* (Chapter Five: 'Of Writing'), he sees language as having evolved through time away from its primary use for the expression of emotion and towards a secondary use, for the formulation of ideas - a development which has taken place *part passu* with the supplement of speech by alphabetic writing, envisaged by Rousseau as a graphic representation of the sounds of language. 'As needs increase and things become more complex and enlightenment spreads, language changes in character; it becomes more precise and less passionate; it substitutes ideas for feelings, it speaks no longer to the heart but to the reason.' Rousseau is not so foolish or so contradictory as to regret this evolution, of which he is himself making the fullest use in the *Essai* from which these ideas are quoted. He knows that he is anxious to mark off for himself a distinctive ideological space within it.

The pragmatic decision to substitute writing for speaking can not in itself account for the kind of writer that Rousseau has become, in his didactic role as philosopher. For that there has to have been another origin, and given that by the time he came to write the *Confessions* his philosophical publications had brought him both glory

those days to him as he writes that he would wish to perpetuate it: 'What shall I do to prolong this touching and simple tale, as I should like to; endlessly to repeat the same words, and no more to weary my readers by their repetition than I wearied myself by beginning them forever afresh?' (215). By this empty threat of flouting the proprieties of writing, and immobilizing his narrative so as to perpetuate the enjoyment he himself is taking in it, Rousseau shows how facile it is to say, as we often hear it said, that an autobiographer 'relives' his past in the writing of it. The autobiographer alas knows differently; to narrate one's past is to be driven through it without stopping, when the deeper pleasure would come from being free to arrest its progress.

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outside the walls not to return inside his native city, there to complete his servile apprenticeship as an engraver. His companions choose incarceration, he chooses an errant and improvident freedom, so dissociating himself from the servility and fellowship of work. In the reconstruction of this crisis, as in that of Vincennes, accident plays its part, opening the way to that counterfactual speculation dear to both writers and readers of autobiography: Supposing the drawbridge had still been down? What if Rousseau had failed to see the Dijon Academy's announcement? In Rousseau's scheme, contingencies such as these must be accorded a determinant role in his story so that he may look back on himself as having been as much a passive as an active protagonist.

These are crises in his story precious to Rousseau for enabling him to crystallize in their telling his self-pitying version of hindsight, whereby a stark juxtaposition of past and present will expose the fatuity of optimism in a malignant world, and a punitive future be hurried into view to block out the innocent promise of the present. At liberty suddenly from the tyrannical master to whom he has been articulated in Geneva, the boy sets off into the countryside intoxicated by the prospect of his independence and of what he will accomplish in life: 'Now that I was free and my own master, I supposed that I could do anything, achieve anything.' But the road up is the road down, as Hegel very nearly said and as Rousseau in effect does say, by prefacing the hopes he attributes to his fifteen year-old self by the black forebodings which he should have had about the future course of his life. And it is the same with his account of the 'illumination' of Vincennes, more than twenty years later. First we are given the bad, post-dated news, that the decision to compete for the Academy prize was the 'moment's madness' that has ruined the rest of his life; and only then the good news, that once it had been taken he entered on a remarkable period of prolonged mental excitement, in which 'My feelings rose with the most inconceivable rapidity to the level [ton] of my ideas' (328). But this apparently benign intellectual ferment must then, by the perverted logic of Rousseau's account, be reinscribed as the sufficient cause of that career in literature which was to end his privacy and bring persecution on him.

Rousseau is the arch catastrophist among autobiographers, the cheerless denouement of whose story requires preparation by a series of premonitory inflections. The episode at Vincennes is the more stagey - operatic might be the word - for giving off a distant but

perceptible sound of music. It involves a dramatic change of tempo: along the road to Vincennes Rousseau has taken out his newspaper in order to slow himself down, as if the mediacy of print were essential for such a small act of will on his part; then, on the far side of the climactic decision, we get the 'inconceivable rapidity' with which his feelings rise into unison with his thoughts. In both the short *rallentando* along the road and the sustained *accelerando* that ensues, body and mind are synchronized, or else harmonized, given that in the second instance his feelings and his ideas have risen explicitly to the same 'ton', which can best be translated as 'pitch'. As a theorist and composer of music, Rousseau was the advocate of melody as against mere harmony, because melody, and especially song, by its directedness animates and spiritualizes what would otherwise remain a lower pleasure, satisfying the senses alone. Melody moves us, according to Rousseau, by mimesis of our emotions, which it articulates, so transforming the sounds of music into affective signs. In moments such as the crisis at Vincennes, the text of the *Confessions* becomes particularly melodious, as Rousseau plays on our emotions in order to harmonize them with his own. But his whole autobiographical venture, like that of Augustine earlier, can be read as a musical composition: in Rousseau's case as an articulation of its subject's feelings intended as mimetic of his emotionally tumultuous life. In his exalted state after Vincennes, he has found a rare harmony: the two 'almost unalloyable' elements of his nature, his ardent heart and his reluctant brain, have come into unison and have remained so for several years. But for Rousseau the confirmed melodist harmony is not gain but loss, since it is a state recalcitrant to narrative; he will invoke but not develop it; the aria must resume.

The two related episodes on which I have been dwelling have one other far from casual element in common: they both display Rousseau as a pedestrian. In the first instance during his adolescence, he is caught outside the town because he has been off wandering, on a *promenade* with friends; then, the decision once made not to go back, he sets off wandering again, into the nearby countryside, the temporary freedom of an afternoon off exchanged now for what in his imagination is a permanent freedom. Again, outside Vincennes, the walking is an integral part of the causal chain, as I have suggested, since if he had not been walking he would not have read the notice in the newspaper, and if he had not read the notice... For Rousseau there is a vital association between the movement of his body and the

THE NATURAL ORDER

In Rousseau's vagabondage there is autarky, and in autarky a verbal inspiration, in the exchange of an ordered society for the random companionship of the road, Rousseau becomes both freed-man and writer. It is by the tongue, or by its inescapable surrogate, the pen, that he will come in the end to fame and to disaster, so that the truly momentous initiation of his life is that into language. But our first coming to language lies beyond the reach of memory; it is not to be recovered and told honestly as a philosopher and incooperates it into his story only by behaving as a philosopher and proceeding by analogy: it can only have been for me as it was for all infants. Rousseau is too possessive of his own gifts to relapse into the anonymity entailed by Augustine's scrupulousness. He bids his time and makes of the freeing of his tongue a memorable event of his adolescence.

This liberating episode occurs during the months that he has spent in Turin after his baptism there as a Catholic. The penniless, sixteen-year-old boy has found work as a footman in an aristocratic household, where his real talents are unknown, except to himself. His servile status and his timidity are both against him, especially once he has come to feel desire for the young grand-daughter of the house. There is only one way open to him to attract this patrician girl's attention, which is by saying something to impress her. He does so twice over, first by countering some disabliging remark made against him by her brother with 'so neat and smart an answer that she noticed it and threw me a glance', and then, more theatrically, by revealing himself as more knowledgeable than all those present - but the head of the family - by correctly interpreting the family motto, which happens to be in French. On this formative occasion his mute acquiescence in the given state of things has been overcome; by speaking he has established himself at his true worth in front of others and has given the lie to the state of servility in which he is provisionally trapped. It is a moment of high importance to him:

They all looked at me and exchanged glances in silence. Never in my life had I seen such astonishment. But what flattered me more was to see a look of

* This episode of the *Confessions* is the subject of a wonderfully full and persuasive commentary by the greatest of living scholars of Rousseau, Jean Starobinski. See *La Religion civile* (Paris, 1970), pp. 98-153. This is the most remarkable explanation of what is known to me, and my debt to it here is large.

The language of autobiography

activity of his mind, the first, he tells us, having been peculiarly conducive to the second. It is as if he had wanted to recapitulate in his own behaviour his theory of the evolution of natural language; for if this has originated, as he argues that it did, in the immediate, tactile contact between two human bodies, and has then evolved into a visual medium, of bodily gestures and movements made between individuals now further removed from one another physically, then someone like Rousseau who parambulates as he thinks to himself is regressing along the evolutionary chain, back to the stage where the movements of the mind could still be deduced from those of the body. Thought as a mental function is mimetic of the corporeal function of the limbs, and if physical movement induces it, then by a Rousseau-esque logic, thought in its turn can move us, as its addressee - to complete the virtuous circle we should perhaps read the *Confessions* only when ourselves out exercising.

Elsewhere in the *Confessions* Rousseau reveals his habit of composing his books in his head, when out walking alone or else lying into an audacity of thought impossible for him otherwise. Out walking or travelling on his own, he no longer suffers the world, he takes a symbolic possession of it: 'I dispose of all Nature as its master' (158). And the unimpeded command of language of which he is capable in writing is restorative of the phantasmal mastery he has exercised over Nature. Time too he can now call to order, because the writer, like the traveller, can spin things out or speed things up, including, if he is Rousseau, in the doubtful pleasures of procrastination: 'In telling the story of my travels, as in travelling itself, I never know how to stop' (167). In his last literary avatar, as the author of the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, he carries the notion of pedestrian self-sufficiency to the limit, since by now he is not only first but also acting as their delighted and sympathetic reader, the most compliant audience he can imagine for them being himself. He has come as close as he can to autarky, to that 'hearing-one-self-speak' which Derrida takes to be the false paradigm of all such linguistic immediacy.

pleasure on Mlle de Breil's face. That haughty young lady condescended to throw me a second glance, every bit as precious as the first. Then, turning towards her grandfather, she seemed to wait almost impatiently for him to give me the praise which was my due. Indeed he did compliment me so generously and whole-heartedly, and with such an air of pleasure, that the whole table hastened to join in the chorus. That moment was short, but it was in every respect delightful. It was one of those rare moments that put things back in their proper perspective [*dans leur ordre naturel*], repair the slights on true merit and avenge the outrages of fortune. (96-7)

This same delectable restoration of the 'natural order' is Rousseau's deepest desire as an autobiographer, the only difference being that publication of the *Confessions* will effect the permanent restoration of that order, whereas his triumph in Turin was a mere vicissitude. His correct reading of the motto turns on a question of etymology, or on establishing the history of a particular word, which is to elucidate the truth by narrative means; the episode of the motto may stand as a *mise en abyme* of the *Confessions* as a whole.

The 'natural order' is that which has been determined by, and is thus altogether gratifying to, Rousseau himself, and the sanction of Nature is called for if he is to convince us of that order's unassailable primacy over the false order imposed on his life by the slanders and machinations of others. At Turin he avenges the humiliations he has had to endure in silence by speaking audaciously out; in the *Confessions* he will do the same, and on a grand scale. That autobiography serves to settle scores we already knew, from reading Abelard, or Cardano, or Vico; with Rousseau the urge for an autobiographical vindication is absolute.

But if the desirable Mlle de Breil has been brought for once to attend to and admire the young lackey, the boy's etymological coup is instantaneous. After it, his timidity at once returns and, made the more nervous by having entered on this new relationship, he spills water over the girl and by his clumsiness regresses beyond the point from which he had begun.⁴ As throughout the *Confessions*, every up must be followed by a rapid down. Rousseau's formulation of this particular regression is striking: 'Here the romance [*roman*] ended.' He then goes on to generalize from his failure with Mlle de Breil to reflect on a subsequent lifetime of such failures, in bringing his

⁴ This spillage might be read as a symbolic act of masturbation, or a discharge denoting frustration, masturbation having a large part to play in Rousseau's erotic economy, in the typical role of 'supplement' to the 'natural' act of sexual intercourse with a woman.

amours to a successful conclusion. But his momentary escape from the false condition in which he has been living has been ruefully equated with a fiction. It is at once true and yet too good to be true. For the brief interlude during which Rousseau has held the stage, real life has proved as gratifying to him as anything that he might imagine; his initiation into the mastery of language is a literally fabulous event in which reality coincides with fiction and the 'natural order' thus briefly restored is seen to derive not from the world as we experience it but from the world as we find it represented in books.

Rousseau is true to autobiographical type in having been brought up on stories. But where other autobiographers – the severely episcopal Augustine, or the severely practical Teresa – have put fiction behind them, he has been unable to do so. He has in his time written against fiction, condemning it for a lax and evasive pastime unworthy of a serious mind, but he has himself been seduced by it, has even written fiction, though acknowledging as he did so – according to the *Confessions* – that the gratifying scenes he was making up were a facile counterweight to the tribulations of his real life.

Effeminate genre that Rousseau declares it to be, fiction has come down to him from his mother. She has died giving birth to him, but she has left behind some novels, and reading these in early childhood has had a decisive influence on him. We might see these books as taking the place that his mother should have taken; reflecting by the unreality of their contents the child's primal loss. As intermediaries, or as a love offering from the absent mother, they open the way to Rousseau's own work of fiction, *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, which he has written, he would have us believe, with a great reluctance, but because he is too weak to deny himself the voluptuous company of its two female characters – and too weak, once the novel is written, not to read it aloud to real women so as to play vicariously on their feelings.

But his first exposure to fiction has not been woman's work alone; he has read the books left behind by his mother in the company of his father:

I felt before I thought: which is the common lot of man, though more pronounced in my case than another's. I know nothing of myself till I was five or six. I do not know how I learnt to read. I only remember my first books and their effect on me; it is from my earliest reading that I date the unbroken consciousness of my own existence. My mother had possessed