

### **Rousseau: A Less than Conciliatory Confession**

Autobiographers chart a course through the labyrinthine human mind. In his article “Memory and Narrative in Rousseau,” James Olney examines how one author may stray off the map, like a navigator swept away at sea. In his expansive autobiography, Rousseau lets the moorings loose from rational thought. Using Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* as his primary focus, the author argues that Rousseau, in his attempt to create a coherent work of art, instead cuts memory and narrative “loose from will and willed control, to become undirected, compulsive, obsessional.”(208) In other words, the excessive, repetitive text offers a glimpse into the primal. For all his eloquence, Rousseau writes as if he were a more erudite “noble savage”; he returns a refined craft to its state of nature. And as in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau’s treatise on “the noble savage ,” this state of nature exists far from society. Rousseau’s text inadvertently turns from extroversion to introversion, and the outsider ultimately has little access to the “secret heart” of the autobiography. In this way, Rousseau inverts the traditional course of autobiography as charted by his predecessor, Saint Augustine. By writing of his sinful thoughts, his sensual dalliances and the crooked heart beating beneath it all, Augustine hoped to wrench his sufferings from his form and project them upon society. He then becomes an exemplary everyman, who overcomes his faulty humanity to communicate with God above. Augustine set the standard for all biographies to follow. Ultimately, Rousseau fails to create a text that is at once “unique and useful” in spite of his intentions otherwise. (113)

The failure originates in the very attempt; from the start, Rousseau did not recognize the paradoxical nature of his undertaking. Mere words may never offer a way into the corridors of the heart. By overlooking this fact and instead reveling in the vastness of his own literary ambition, Rousseau assured a flawed result. Olney chooses an apt text from Saint Augustine, which outlines the essential paradox of a confessional autobiography. Of others in society, Augustine ascertains, “Their ear is not laid against

my heart; where I am, whatever I am.” Here, the reader senses the palpable anxiety of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in whom paranoia remained ever-present. Having weathered torrents of criticism and moral condemnation—all unleashed by the dual scandals of his public, faulty personal life and his work *Emile*—Rousseau would have penned this line in defense of his character. This defensive line would have fit within the narrative of *The Confessions*— at the end. By this point, the text had already devolved into an apologia, a defense of the author’s oft-criticized life. Saint Augustine, meanwhile, places this observation at the beginning. In the same paragraph, he presents a contrast to his shrewd observation: “I make my confession not only in front of you, but also in the ears of the believing sons of men, companions in my joy and sharers of my mortality...” Where the ears of men were once deaf to the enunciations of the heart, they now hear *The Confessions* in all clarity. Here, Augustine shows the progression of the autobiography, from its genesis as an intensely personal endeavor to its fruition as a text for the people. Despite his knowledge that no man may ever truly understand him, Augustine believes that all men may understand his message: ultimately, man is at one in his frailty and in his relationship with death. Rousseau fails to acknowledge this contradictory aim of autobiography. He ignores the schism. Beyond that, he shuns the very society he wishes to be accepted into. In this way, Rousseau fails to forge the bond of trust with his readers—something requisite in any “useful” piece of writing.

As Olney makes clear, though Rousseau does not overtly acknowledge the contradictory nature of his task, the faults exist nonetheless . At the opening of *The Confessions*, Rousseau claims, with much bravado and little humility, that “I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.” When writing his premise, Rousseau diverges from the swathed path of Augustine. The earlier writer acknowledges his uniqueness but then ushers himself into the community of man; the latter assumes his work can apply to others even as he asserts his uniqueness at the end of his premise. Rousseau continues: “Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world.” Rousseau has unveiled the contradiction without confronting it. One

ponders not only how Rousseau may convey his unique, solitary character, but how he may present his unique self as an everyman. Even if he successfully shows how uniquely he stands among men, then why would this information be “useful” to others? After all, he is fundamentally not like them. In *The Confessions*, the answer never comes.

Perchance Rousseau had little intention of fulfilling his noble literary ambition. Rather, the author adduces that *The Confessions* are an artifact of nostalgia, paranoia and selfishness. To bolster his claim, the author offers as his first piece of evidence the sheer length of the novel. He contends, “Writing and language had for Rousseau a tendency to become independent, self representational, autotelic, and consequently treacherous.”(113) In other words, Rousseau’s florid style defies a clean, linear narrative that easily directs the reader. Such is the contention of the author: Instead of Michelangelo, imagine Willem De Kooning or any other Abstract Expressionist painting the Old Testament on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The narrative would vanish in a haze of wild reckless brush strokes. Obviously, here the author goes askance in his critique of Rousseau’s *Confessions*.

Indeed, Rousseau writes with eloquence and with an ear for rhythm; shorter sentences balance and complement longer ones that employ semi-colons. He critiques not the verbosity of the prose, but the gluttony of the text. By its excessive length and overly rich detail, the text assumes an aura of self-indulgence. Rousseau enmeshes both he and the reader in needless details, which repeat themselves *ad infinitum*. Anticipating this criticism, Rousseau writes, “Before I go any further I must present my reader with an apology, or rather a justification, for the petty details I have just been entering into, and for those I shall enter into later, none of which may appear interesting in his eyes. Since I have undertaken to reveal myself absolutely to the public, nothing about me must remain hidden or obscure.” Despite this qualifier, Rousseau could hardly claim that a reader would note the absence of a trivial detail. His many passages describing impetuous love become repetitive and contribute little to the text’s usefulness, or even to a greater understanding of the author. Several times during the course of the lengthy if enjoyable reading, one must wonder why Rousseau lavishes so much attention upon trivialities.

Olney believes he has discovered the essence of the problem: Rousseau must put everything down on paper before he can sort through the text and create a newfound

reality for his life. After all, *The Confessions* were written by a man at the precipice of death—a certain longing for the wonderment of breathless, ungainly youth lingers throughout the novel. As the author notes, Rousseau himself felt compelled to write at times for purely personal reasons: “My imagination, which in my youth looked forward but now looks back, compensates me with these sweet memories for the hope I have lost forever.” *The Confessions* carry a strong undercurrent of nostalgia for things long lost and never to be recovered. Of his past life, more than once he laments, “This life was too sweet to last.” Nostalgia inherently means that the present is not as good as the past, and that matters will only worsen. At times during the novel, Rousseau recounts how recollected emotions inspire the same emotions anew. For instance, of his first encounter with violence, he writes, “I feel my pulse beat faster once more as I write.” It is hardly surprising, then, that Rousseau pays particular homage to his amorous adventures as a youth. In all of life, these remain the most enthralling of emotions. He crafts like a true Romantic, entrusting his emotions instead of his intellect. For all his learning, intellectual prowess may never match emotion: “Feelings come quicker than lightning and fill my soul, but they bring me no illumination; they burn and dazzle me.” Through his writing, Rousseau hopes to re-ignite that quickening fire. To offer but one instance: When Rousseau writes, “I am sorry to show so many girls in love with me” the reader cannot help but detect an ironic swagger in the claim. Some of these passages do not reverberate as guilty; rather, they feel sensual and pleasurable: not the stuff of a true confession.

One senses the longing of an old man re-tracing his meandering footsteps. Sweetness having past, bitterness reigns. Rousseau often wallows in a self-pity inspired by nostalgia and a growing anxiety for the future. Because of its implicit inconsistencies, Olney argues that Rousseau never intended a confession in the Augustinian sense of the word. While Augustine’s rhetorical stance can be compared to an embrace, Rousseau ultimately seems to shoo people away with an uneasy defiance. Hence the oddly cynical passage at the premise: “So let the numberless region of men gather round me, and read my confessions. Let them groan at my depravities, and blush at my misdeeds. But let each one reveal his heart at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity, and may any man who dares, say ‘I was a better man than he.’” Here, Rousseau reveals the true intention of the autobiography. It is similar in some ways to Augustine’s view—all men are alike in

their frailty and in their relationship to death. But its tone is not conciliatory; it is instead cantankerous and self-defensive.

By writing his confessions, Rousseau hoped to restore dignity to his impugned name. In this agitated frame of mind, Rousseau infuses ordinary events with more insidious meanings. He pinpoints moments during youth and assigns them a disproportionate amount of import. Of one cold woman, he writes, “She judged me less by what I was than by what she had made me...I believe it was then that I was first victim of that malicious play of intrigue that has thwarted me all my life, and has given me a very natural aversion for the apparent order of things which produces it.” Victimhood. Throughout *The Confessions*, this theme rises like a banshee from the mind of the author; a concrete manifestation of paranoia. Once more, Rousseau reiterates his convoluted premise, “I warn those who intend to begin this book, therefore, that nothing will save them from progressive boredom except the desire to complete their knowledge of a man, and a genuine love of truth and justice.” The reader would do well to return to the final part of the compound sentence: *and a genuine love of truth and justice*.

In the end, Rousseau is merely attempting to gild his reputation; to frame his muddled life with precise borders. Late in *The Confessions*, Rousseau describes four letters he sent to a Monsieur de Malesherbes: “Pained that a man for whom I had so much respect had been so mistaken, I wrote him four consecutive letters explaining the real motives of my conduct, giving him a faithful description of my tastes, my inclinations, my character, and all the inclinations of my heart.” He continues to state, “I groaned at the thought of leaving so incorrect a picture of myself in the minds of honest men...in those four letters I attempted to write a substitute for the memoirs I had planned to write.” These letters serve as proxies for *The Confessions*, and their sole purpose is to restore Rousseau’s maligned reputation. Despite his noble premise, Rousseau ultimately writes for self-centered reasons. Abandoning the nobility of Saint Augustine, Rousseau concludes *The Confessions* with these defensive, pugnacious lines: “I publically and fearlessly declare that anyone, even if he has not read my writings, who will examine my nature, my character, my morals, my likings, my pleasures, and my habits with his own eyes and can still believe me a dishonorable man, is a man who deserves to be stifled.”

Here, the reader sees the corrosive effects of paranoia on Rousseau's heart—he concludes an often eloquent, thoughtful work with this bizarre, confrontational personal polemic.

Clearly, Rousseau has little use for society, and retreats from it when has the opportunity to do so. The world outside bedevils and even terrifies him: “The ceiling under which I live has eyes, the walls that enclose me have ears. Uneasy and distracted, surrounded by spies and by vigilant and malevolent watchers, I hurriedly put on paper a few disjointed sentences...” Rousseau had endured the scathing critiques of his less than savory personal life. He took as his mistress his serving maid and sent all five of his children off to an orphanage; likewise, he grew incensed by the moral condemnation of his progressive works, such as *Emile*. Eventually Rousseau fell victim to a peculiar strain of persecution anxiety, as evidenced in his fantastic claim that spies were watching him as he wrote, and in his final desire to have his naysayers stifled. Needless to say, these malevolent beings were hardly real. From this odd quote, one imagines the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, and his famous print *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. In it, the artist sleeps, slumped in his desk. Above him, a whirlwind of beasts and demons hover—creatures spawned from a tormented imagination.

For James Olney, the author of “Memory and Narrative in Rousseau,” *The Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau offer insights into the state of a paranoid mind. For all his eloquence and rationality, Rousseau habitually gorges himself on sweet memories and malicious thoughts. Having read *The Confessions*, a bittersweet aftertaste thus lingers with the reader. Where Augustine confessed so that he may offer himself as an example for anyone struggling to communicate with God, Rousseau confessed in order to discourage his enemies, be they real or imagined. One man uses a deeply personal work to embrace society; the other, to shun it and restore his personal virtue. In this way, Rousseau returns to wayward, glorious days, and extracts meaning from them. By writing *The Confessions*, Rousseau hopes to crystalize a life riddled with emotion and desire.