

The Author as Celebrity and Outcast: Authorship and Autobiography in Rousseau

Ourida Mostefai

Confessions of a Celebrity

As Rousseau sets out to write his *Confessions*, he is acutely aware of his celebrity status. Indeed, in the first draft of his preface, his public acclaim is presented as the main justification for his autobiographical enterprise: “Si je n’ai pas la célébrité du rang et de la naissance, j’en ai une autre qui est plus à moi et que j’ai mieux achetée; j’ai la célébrité des malheurs” (*Ebauches des Confessions*, OC 1: 1151) (“If I do not have the celebrity of rank and birth, I do have another one which is more my own and which I purchased more dearly; I have the celebrity of misfortunes” [CW 5: 587]). Anticipating objections to his work, he proudly proclaims his originality: the nature of his fame, which sets him apart from his contemporaries and compensates for his lowly social rank.

This provocative passage bears witness to the profound change in the status of the writer in the Enlightenment. Rousseau’s autobiographical writings are the work of a man whose name is known throughout Europe, whose works have been widely disseminated, and whose life has become the object of public scrutiny. Having freed himself from the tutelage of royal power, the author now depends on the public. No longer protected by a system of patronage, he needs to be visible to, and to seek justification from, the public. His works must be circulated and his image promoted; such is the dear price exacted by this new type of celebrity.

As Jean-Claude Bonnet states, the Enlightenment represents the emergence of the public persona of the writer: “Eighteenth-century men of letters are the first to witness both this proliferation of commentary on their persons and the increase in their public image” (262; my trans.). Rousseau’s autobiographical writings, then, can be seen both as a manifestation of and a reaction to this new interest in the author as an individual and in the life he lives outside his works.

Rousseau is keenly aware that the public is developing a curiosity about the private lives of authors, that “the image of the man of letters that is gaining ground at the time has a very private character” (Bonnet 261). Voltaire had remarked in his *Lettres philosophiques* that pictures of writers were common in private homes in England. For Voltaire, seeing portraits of Alexander Pope in scores of houses was a testimony to the importance, to the English nation, of men of letters—a proof of their public recognition. Half a century later, Rousseau would experience the burgeoning of the personal cult of the author,

complete with visits, fan mail, and pilgrimages. Thus in insisting, as he does, on “telling it all,” Rousseau is responding to and exploiting the public desire to peer into an author’s private life.

The *Confessions* and the *Rêveries* are thus a response to this inquisitiveness, to this eagerness for knowledge of the person behind the writing. According to Rousseau, his publisher Marc-Michel Rey had urged him to write his memoirs. But in choosing to offer his *Confessions*, Rousseau moves beyond the boundaries of the more established genre and proposes to satisfy the public’s demand for information by providing previously unpublicized self-explanations and other personal subjects. What motivates Rousseau is the wish not merely to publish his story but to alter his public perception—to correct the distorted picture that his enemies have circulated about him. The *Confessions* is Rousseau’s attempt to reshape the reception of his work that has been based on a misrepresentation of its author. Addressed to the public—both present and future—the *Confessions* thus seeks to substitute one image of the celebrated author for another: “Il y avoit un Rousseau dans le grand monde, et un autre dans la retraite qui ne lui ressembloit en rien” (*Ebauches* 1151) (“There was a Rousseau in high society, and another in retirement who bore no resemblance to him” [587]). Rousseau draws a sharp contrast between the falsity of the public image and the truth of the private one. Writing about himself will allow him to undo the damage caused by fame; for fame has produced a distorted image, a lie that conceals the author’s true self.

For Rousseau, the autobiographical task necessarily involves the reeducation of a public that must be consistently informed and corrected in its views so as to be able to make a thoughtful choice. Even the *Rêveries*, which Rousseau claims to be writing only for himself, continues the process of correction. In the later text, he tries to “set the record straight” by offering minute details of actual events. In the Second Walk, for instance, the reader is presented with an account of the Mémilmontant accident that closes with the following statement, in the fashion of a bureaucratic (police) document: “Voilà très fidèlement l’histoire de mon accident” (1006) (“That, very faithfully, is the story of my accident” [13]).

The *Dialogues* carries this instructional enterprise one step further by presenting the two identities of the author jointly (that of Rousseau, and that of Jean-Jacques) and helping the reader differentiate between the private self and the public image. By including embarrassing revelations, Rousseau displays a side of himself not yet known by the public and, at the same time, responds to his accusers. The “private” facts revealed in the *Confessions* are supposed to counteract the falsehoods of the *Sentiments des citoyens*, the anonymous pamphlet now believed to have been written by Voltaire and in which Rousseau was accused of having abandoned his children to the streets. The accusation regarding their abandonment needs to be clarified and the misleading statements in the character assassination revealed. By admitting his guilt, Rousseau nevertheless insists on his innocence: he has abandoned his

children, but he has not harmed them, as the *Sentiments du citoyen* had claimed.

For the question is: Who has the right to judge the author? Rousseau systematically claims that the public is the only legitimate judge. Interestingly, by setting up a sharp division between the public opinion on his side and the world of letters against him, Rousseau makes his celebrity status rest on his popularity among readers. He becomes a creation of the public, a popular writer despised by the literary establishment. This is not a pure invention, of course, since we know that the reception of many of Rousseau's works followed such a pattern. For instance, according to Louis Sébastien Mercier, the reception of *Julie* was characterized by a rift between the general public and the literary elite: "Writers rejected the effect of the work as much as they could; the public took it up in good faith" (qtd. in Trousson, *Mémoire de la critique* 535; my trans.). Indeed, as Maurice Cranston points out, the popular response "transformed the author from a literary celebrity into a cult figure" (*Solitary Self* xi).

Celebrity and Outcast

We see now the paradoxical character of Rousseau as a literary figure: he is simultaneously famous and marginal. One of the most acclaimed men of the Enlightenment is also, by his own account, the most obscure: "Parmi mes contemporains, il est peu d'hommes dont le nom soit plus connu dans l'Europe et dont l'individu soit plus ignoré" (*Ebauches* 1151) ("Among my contemporaries there are few men whose names are more known in Europe and whose person is more unknown" [587]).

If we are to believe him, Rousseau's career lasted about ten years, from the publication of his first *Discours* (*Discours sur les sciences et les arts*) to the publication of *Emile* and the *Contrat social*. Throughout his work and his correspondence, when Rousseau recounts his entry into the world of letters, he insists that his debut was never an act of will. Repeatedly, he describes this episode as having occurred "in spite of himself," against his will, as well as against all odds.

In a letter written in 1735, in response to his father's questions regarding his future, Jean-Jacques considers three possible careers: musician, secretary, and preceptor (tutor). They are, we might note, three professions that Rousseau will actually hold: as composer of *Le Devin du village*, secretary to the French ambassador in Venice, and preceptor of the Mably children. For the young Rousseau, being a man of letters is neither a profession nor an established position. He continually insists on his lack of vocation for writing, on the difficulty and the suffering he must endure in his work: "On s'imaginait que je pouvois écrire par métier comme tous les autres gens de lettres, au lieu que je ne sus jamais écrire que par passion" (*Conf.* 513) ("They imagined

that I could write as a trade as all the other literary people did, instead of which I could never write except out of passion" [430]).

In the *Confessions*, Rousseau states that "depuis quelque tems, je formois le projet de quitter tout à fait la littérature et surtout le métier d'Auteur" (514) ("For some time, I had been forming the plan of leaving literature altogether and above all the trade of Author" [430]). One of the leitmotifs of the autobiographical texts is his claim to have abandoned the literary career: "Ayant quitté tout à fait la littérature, je ne songeai plus qu'à mener une vie tranquille et douce autant qu'il dépendroit de moi" (601) ("Since I had given up literature completely, I no longer thought of anything but leading a tranquil and sweet life as far as it depended on me" [503]). Rousseau seems simultaneously to be giving up on the status of man of letters and claiming to reinvent it, of finding a new language for it.

Rousseau had begun his career with an accusation against his contemporaries, guilty according to him of having been seduced and corrupted by a pseudophilosophy. This accusation is meant to be both general and particular: directed at society as a whole for having substituted the appearance of virtue for real virtue, but also specifically at the society of men of letters: "cette foule d'Ecrivains obscurs et de Lettrés oisifs, qui dévorent en pure perte la substance de l'Etat" (first *Discours*, OC 3: 19) ("that crowd of obscure Writers and idle men of Letters who uselessly consume the substance of the State" [CW 2: 19]). The personal transformation he recounts in his autobiographical writings is offered to the readers as a testimony to his fundamental difference from the literary establishment, a difference based on his sincerity.

Readers of Rousseau's autobiographical writings are confronted with two seemingly incompatible images of the author. On the one hand, Rousseau presents himself as a celebrity whose name is known throughout Europe and who laments the loss of privacy that results from fame. On the other hand, Jean-Jacques is portrayed as an outcast, banished from his contemporaries, and condemned by a vast conspiracy to solitude and marginality:

Me voici donc seul sur la terre, n'ayant plus de frere, de prochain, d'ami, de société que moi-même. Le plus sociable et le plus aimant des humains en a été proscrit par un accord unanime. (*Rêv.* 995)

I am now alone on earth, no longer having any brother, neighbor, friend, or society other than myself. The most sociable and the most loving of humans has been proscribed from society by a unanimous agreement.

(3)

It is the strategy of the *Confessions* and the *Rêveries* to portray Rousseau in a state of solitude. However, the reading of the correspondence can help us correct this impression. Indeed, what the letters reveal is that, in exile, Rousseau continues to be a celebrity: streams of visitors come to visit him,

seeking advice or simply wanting to meet the great man. Furthermore, as Frédéric Eigeldinger's research has shown (167–73), while in exile in Môtiers, Rousseau carefully cultivated an image of himself as a solitary figure, artfully concealing from his visitors his very real engagement in contemporary controversies and disputes. Rousseau's exile did not simply contribute to his fame; it was enlisted in the author's effort to construct and reconstruct his famous persona.

We know that Marie Antoinette paid homage to Rousseau's tomb on the Ile des peupliers. Could it be that Marie Antoinette found, in Rousseau's fate, solace for her own difficult fame? Perhaps. She would certainly not be the last of the celebrities and outcasts to identify with the "misfortune" of Jean-Jacques.

CLOSE READINGS

Truth and the Other in Rousseau's *Confessions*

Christie McDonald

Teaching Rousseau's *Confessions* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with renewed interest in ethics and popular forms of personal and testimonial writing, presents certain philosophical and formal challenges. Rousseau writes his life story as both a philosophical model for understanding humanity and a unique mission: "Je sens mon cœur et je connois les hommes" (5) ("I feel my heart and I know men" [5]). The task is to situate this writing about life in the broader context of Rousseau's social and political work. By reading the comb scene, in book 1 of the *Confessions*, in relation to the early anthropological works and a series of sketches for the *Confessions*, instructors can show how truth emerges not only as a pact between author and reader, as Philippe Lejeune has suggested for all autobiography, but as a social contract (however inadequately realized) between self and other. The need for the contract is born out of the rough transition from a utopian vision of a natural state to the facts of history and culture, in which a bond is created that is the necessary result, beyond anarchy or revolution, of Rousseau's primary intuition about the discontinuity between the two.

Rousseau came to these first principles only in his autobiographical writing. His work divides into three major periods: the early anthropological writings (the first and second *Discours* and the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*); the great sociopolitical books written in the 1750s and early 1760s (*Emile*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and the *Contrat social*); and the late autobiographical writings (the *Confessions*, along with the *Dialogues* and the *Rêveries*). Instructors might teach all the books separately, in the context of various courses, but I