

Teaching Rousseau's *Confessions* in Translation

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Dependence on translations is an inescapable fact of life for anyone who teaches courses on the history of political thought, as I do. An introductory course typically covers authors such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Marx. Reading them in the original language would require a mastery of Greek, Latin, Italian, French, and German, as well as English. Such reliance on translations brings about the curious result that students revolt at reading Hobbes because they have been reading the other authors in contemporary American English and find the English of the seventeenth century too difficult. I once had a colleague who seriously proposed translating Locke's *Second Treatise* into modern American. As strange as this proposal seemed to me, I could not offer a principled objection to it that would not also apply to the translations of the other works in the course.

The one objection that could be raised is that, difficult as it may be for students to read Hobbes's English, the task is not impossible. There are even advantages in the challenge, to the extent that it stems from the changing meanings of words. Hobbes strove for technical precision in his use of certain terms, and his archaic language can force students to follow his diction more closely. In comparison, translations into modern American can be too easy to read because the vocabulary looks so familiar. To give students a sense of the difficulty of the works they are reading, I have always looked for—and on occasion attempted to produce—translations that strive more for precision and faithfulness than readability.

I have found that, despite the problems students have in reading the translation I tend to choose, they share my taste, because they have a rather naive perspective on the faithfulness of translations. A friend in a French department once taught a course on the art of translation, using a text by Rousseau as the original from which his students would work. He told me that one of the students happened to look at a published translation of the original and, from its looseness, concluded that Rousseau had written two different works with the same title. The student had the view that all translators aim at rigorous versions.

My own preferences and practice notwithstanding, I differ from that student in recognizing one argument that leads in a direction very different from the one I take. To some of my friends who teach in French departments, the idea of the introductory course I described above is, at best, amusing. They assert that anyone hoping for an adequate understanding of an author must and will learn the writer's language. Translations cannot reproduce the original, this view goes, and cannot be taken seriously. Therefore, they should be written to provide a pleasurable reading experience rather than to produce a true rendering of the work. In presuming that serious study can begin (al-

aint-Preux's malaise in society, the *Confessions* (115 [96–97]). y, the letter brings to light the :. These various themes are *logues* to establish the authen- ten works (1: 685–90 [1: 21–

Dialogues project, in a nutshell, by Rousseau—particularly the nd *amour de soi*. His attempt d his authorship in the light of f his music, represents a sum- ox of his wanting to be read at e, flies in the face of his argu- ar from bringing closure, the s work and intensifies the com- ption of his writing.

with an accessible foundation, out, instead, broadens horizons. tailed analysis of selected pas- ersing excerpts and basic texts but exposes students to works o read later. And because this f the themes that serve as the in general, students practice a ate resources for term papers. nspired to apply the intertextual *Confessions*, *Julie*, and *Emile*. ear or narrative knowledge of he intricacies of his philosoph- igh they have spent a quarter to learn about him if they wish

though it can never end) with a translation, I am prepared to sacrifice this pleasure. I would like to defend my favorable opinion of translations by addressing two issues: first, the advantages of striving for precision; and second, the usefulness of translations in situating works in an appropriate context.

Certainly the effort to achieve complete faithfulness to the original is as hopeless as it is worthy. While working on a translation of *Rousseau juge de Jean Jaques*, I asked a group of Rousseau scholars how they would translate this title. One suggested *Rousseau on Trial*. The others, more literal minded, saw no difficulty in reproducing the title. Unfortunately, while most were convinced that *juge* was a noun, others (a minority, to be sure) thought it was a verb. This ambiguity cannot be preserved in English, and therefore a more or less arbitrary decision must be made. This problem is discussed, along with references to Rousseau's use of the noun and the verb in the text, in *Collected Writings* (1: xxx).

Sometimes decisions about how to translate a troublesome word or phrase are less arbitrary, and discussing them with the class can serve an educational purpose. One example from the *Confessions* involves Rousseau's use of *patrie*. The term first occurs very early in the work, when Rousseau refers to himself as "fils d'un pere dont l'amour de la patrie étoit la plus forte passion" (9) ("son of a father whose love of the fatherland was his strongest passion" [8]). Forty or fifty years ago, probably only someone who wished to associate Rousseau with fascism would have translated *patrie* as "fatherland"; "country" would have been the preferred rendering. This alternative is appropriate in the *Confessions*, but it would pose a problem for a translator of *Emile* confronted with the remark "qui n'a pas une patrie a du moins un pays" (4: 858) ("he who does not have a fatherland at least has a country" [Bloom 473]). The statement shows clearly what is implicit in all of Rousseau's uses of *patrie*: the term's connotation of membership in a community is much stronger than in corresponding words in ordinary American usage. Asking students to reflect on the difference between "fatherland" and "country" is a useful exercise. Many other terms that challenge translators can be used to raise other important issues. In the *Collected Writings*, Roger D. Masters and I have frequently used notes to discuss vexing terms, and Victor Gourevitch has an excellent discussion of ambiguous words and phrases in his edition of Rousseau's political writings (xliv–liii).

A related issue in the teaching of any book is the relevant context for introducing it. One of the features that make the *Confessions* an excellent work to present is its accessibility. Part 1, in particular, requires little background information to win the interest of students. Many of the well-known people discussed in part 2, however, are unknown to most students today. My experience indicates that even Diderot, Rameau, and Voltaire need some explanation. Nevertheless, I would say that eighteenth-century intellectual life is not the most necessary context into which the *Confessions* can be put. Rather, I emphasize two other contexts, pointed to by Rousseau himself: the tradition

of exemplary lives and Rousseau's own writings. Some illustrations indicate the sort of perspective each context gives to a reading of the *Confessions*; the first one shows the virtual inescapability of relying on translations.

In the *Rêveries* Rousseau says, "Dans le petit nombre de Livres que je lis quelquefois encore, Plutarque est celui qui m'attache et me profite le plus. Ce fut la première lecture de mon enfance, ce sera la dernière de ma vieillesse" (1024) ("Of the small number of Books I still occasionally read, Plutarch is the one who grips and benefits me the most. He was the first I read in my childhood, he will be the last I read in my old age" [29]). In his old age, Rousseau read the *Moralia*, but in his youth he read the *Lives* and, in the *Confessions*, he says that "je devenois le personnage dont je lisois la vie" (9) ("I became the character whose life I read" [8]). Rousseau's account of the effect of reading lives is relevant to the understanding of the effect he expects his own life story to have on his readers. Students can experience this effect in Plutarch and compare it with the effect of reading Rousseau. Should they read Plutarch in English, or must they read him in French, as Rousseau did, or perhaps in the original Greek?

A similar question occurs if we consider an even more important element of the tradition of lives. Rousseau does not specifically mention Augustine in the *Confessions*, but he makes numerous references to the author of the rival *Confessions* in the *Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont*, written as he was beginning to work on his own *Confessions* in earnest. Rousseau's silence about Augustine in the *Confessions*, then, can hardly be taken as a sign that he was not thinking about the earlier writer. Thus, the opening statement, "Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur" (5) ("I am forming an undertaking which has no precedent, and the execution of which will have no imitator whatsoever" [5]), can be taken as a slap at his most famous predecessor.

There are numerous implicit parallels to Augustine in Rousseau's *Confessions* (see Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life* 103–07), and they invariably involve sharp disagreements that show why Rousseau refuses to accept Augustine as a genuine forebear. One example suffices. The importance of sinfulness in Augustine's treatment of human nature is indicated by his famous statement "so tiny a child, so great a sinner" (15). Not only does Rousseau insist on attributing his own childhood misdeeds to "bons sentimens mal dirigés" (32) ("good feelings badly directed" [27]) but he does not even use the word "péché" ("sin") in his *Confessions*. An adequate understanding of the *Confessions* depends more on an appreciation of Rousseau's presentation of human life—in which sin is not a meaningful idea—than on a knowledge of other writers in eighteenth-century France. In an ideal course on the two *Confessions*, students would read both in the original languages; in a satisfactory class, students can read one or both in translation.

The second context I suggest for teaching the *Confessions* examines the work for the light it can shed on Rousseau's peculiar personality. Frequently,

when the *Confessions* is treated in relation to his theoretical writings, it is used to explain, or explain away, aspects of his thought as more or less simple reflections of that personality. Teaching the *Confessions* in political science courses presents the opportunity of reversing this tendency by considering Rousseau's autobiography in the context of his political writings. In the approach I take, I present the *Confessions* as a case study illustrating Rousseau's understanding of human nature. I often teach it together with *Emile*, Rousseau's other major case study meant to illustrate his views on human life.

Emile and the *Confessions* are complementary works in several ways. When Rousseau discusses his choice of an imaginary pupil in the earlier work, he says:

Quand je pourrais choisir, je ne prendrais qu'un esprit commun tel que je suppose mon élève. On n'a besoin d'élever que les hommes vulgaires; leur éducation doit seule servir d'exemple à celle de leurs semblables. Les autres s'élèvent malgré qu'on en ait. (4: 266)

If I could choose, I would take only a common mind, such as I assume my pupil to be. Only ordinary men need to be raised; their education ought to serve as an example only of that of their kind. The others raise themselves in spite of what one does. (Bloom 52).

Emile, then, presents the natural education of an ordinary boy. The *Confessions* presents the decidedly unnatural self-education of a man who is not "fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent" (5) ("made like any that exist" [5]). Together these works give Rousseau's account of the ordinary and the extraordinary in human nature, as well as the good and the bad in its nurture.

These general parallels between the two works are carried through in particular details. In both works, thematic attention is paid to the issues of stimulation of the imagination through reading, the awakening of sexual desire, the first experience of anger, and the development of *amour-propre*. To be sure, these themes do not appear in the same order in the two works, and the two move in different directions (Kelly 76–100). *Emile* is kept from reading until he is fifteen, and his sexual desire, anger, and *amour-propre* are either delayed or repressed. From his earliest youth, Jean-Jacques lives in the imaginary world formed by his reading, and his passions are stimulated in complex ways. These differences, however, are far from contradictory, and the significance of each sequence can be grasped only when the two are compared.

The sort of limbo within which a translation exists is captured by a remark in the introduction to a fine translation of Machiavelli's *Prince*. After explaining the principles guiding his translation, Harvey C. Mansfield says, "If the reader thinks my translation a bad one, let him try his own; if he thinks it good, let him learn Italian" (xxvii). This statement implies, first, that anyone who is a

competent judge will find defects in the translation and, second, that anyone who fails to find defects should take the required steps to become a competent judge. Translations are unnecessary for those who know the original language. They can be dangerous for anyone who doesn't, because they may foster the illusion that the reader has understood the work in question when he or she has understood only an imperfect translation. It is easy to reach the conclusion that translations are good neither for those who can do without them nor for those who cannot.

An alternative conclusion does, however, present itself. Translations can be useful for those who are not yet in a position to do without them—for those who do not have the competence to study the original but who might be inspired to acquire it. This description fits most university students, and, in fact, I think that a student might well be defined as someone who is not yet, but might become, capable of pursuing knowledge without the help of teachers or of translators. Adopting theological language, one can say that a translation offers the reflected and dim glimpse of the goal in order to encourage someone who is frightened at entering the purgatory of introductory language study.