

# Interpretation

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## Essays in Honor of Christopher Kelly

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# Interpretation

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## Rousseau and the Metamorphoses of the I

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To sign one's books, to choose to acknowledge one's works in one's name at the risk of exposing oneself to repression: in a decisive book, *Rousseau as Author*,<sup>1</sup> Christopher Kelly brought to light the rupture produced by Rousseau's authorial conduct. He stressed its exceptional character, which we no longer notice, since from the following century until our own day in liberal societies, the conduct followed by Rousseau has become the norm. We have forgotten that the *Discourse on Method* did not bear Descartes's name, nor *The Spirit of the Laws* that of Montesquieu. We no longer understand the game involving censorship, nor the rules of this game—the half measures of tacit permission, the accommodations made with the royal censors. Born under the regime of liberty of expression, nothing is more foreign to us than the guerilla warfare of a Voltaire refusing to shoulder the paternity for his libels by dint of vigorous denials, false attributions, and genuine calumnies. Voltaire often lied, energetically, ludicrously, and sometimes perfidiously, convinced that he was lying for a good cause. For against the enemy, all means are good. His anger against “this madman Jean-Jacques” stems from differences of opinion. It is also explained by the divergence between their editorial practices: from Voltaire's point of view, Rousseau is not playing the game. By publishing under his name, he poses as an honest man, should it mean making the “brothers” appear as a mafia. This scrupulous one creates the diabolical ones.

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One's Life to the Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Christopher Kelly has shown that the decision to sign was gradual: it is not settled until 1753, still alternating until then with anonymity.<sup>2</sup> It is in 1751, during the polemic which follows the first *Discourse*, that the name “Rousseau” is seen in print for the first time. With the exception of the letter to l’Abbé de Raynal, the three responses which follow—to King Stanislas, to Bordes, and to Lecat respectively—appear with his signature. This is also the case for the piece *Narcissus*, whose preface takes up again the polemic opened by the first *Discourse*. Consequently, it is no exaggeration to say that Rousseau’s *I* is forged in combat, as if he were choosing—but is it a choice?—to uphold his theses by throwing himself into battle, without reservation or distance.

He could rightly write in the evening of his life: “I saw many who philosophized much more learnedly than I, but their philosophy was so to speak foreign to them.”<sup>3</sup> Rousseau believes what he says, and endeavors to do what he advocates. By exposing himself personally, he removed himself from a regime of disjunction between man and work, the one which Saint-Preux, arriving in Paris, is shocked to discover. “It is not even required of an author, especially of a moralist, that he speak like his books, nor that he acts as he speaks. His writings, his speeches, his conduct are three altogether different things that he is not obliged to reconcile.”<sup>4</sup>

There is, therefore, a social falsification, an encouragement to disassociation which seems to be standard practice in good society, where adherence to what one believes is bad form, while distance is a mark of elegance: a regrettable avatar, in the field of ideas, of that aristocratic nonchalance imported from Italy under the name of *sprezzatura*.

That is a general reason which concerns all the *gens de lettres*, at least those who frequent society, that is to say those who matter and who are talked about. But there is also a particular reason, specific to Rousseau, owing to the fact that his ideas cannot be assimilated. If one expects of him that he present his theses as a *jeu d’esprit*, it is because in an inegalitarian and corrupt society, they are literally unbelievable. “They claim that I do not believe a word of the truths that I have upheld, and that in demonstrating a proposition, I did not cease to believe the contrary.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1969–1995), 1:1012. Hereafter referred to as *OC* with volume and page number.

<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in *OC* 2:155.

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, *Préface de Narcisse*, in *OC* 2:961.

Rousseau was at one with his ideas, in a world in which his ideas are so out of tune that everyone takes them for paradoxes, even his friends, as Diderot's reaction indicates. According to the latter, the stand taken by Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* was adopted on his advice, and with the aim of making himself conspicuous: "You will take the stand that no one will take."<sup>6</sup> Diderot predicts correctly and misses what is essential. In relentlessly defending such ideas, Rousseau has no intention of distinguishing himself strategically in order to stand out from the crowd in the eyes of the judges, but of undertaking to be the other in this monarchical and civilized French society: foreign, republican, and *barbarian*, to go back to the beginning of a verse by Ovid that he considered or chose as epigraph no fewer than three times in his life, from his first work to the penultimate one:

*barbarus hic ego sum  
quia non intellegor illis.*<sup>7</sup>

Foreign and republican without reservation, but barbarian *cum grano salis*. Like the exiled poet, Rousseau is not himself a barbarian, but he is made such from the outside, because of the incomprehension which surrounds him.

Did he unify himself with his writings on purpose, or was he not able to do otherwise? The account of his reform analyzes a metamorphosis of self "which lasted almost six years"<sup>8</sup> after the publication of the first *Discourse*, until he was returned to nature "above which I had *wanted* to raise myself."<sup>9</sup> Undeniably, the will played its part: he did not raise himself without having wanted to. Rousseau made himself the ensign for his system during his Parisian years, until his departure for the Hermitage. He came out of himself in order to serve frugality and equality, which are calumniated in modern civilization. This political intention is not discredited in itself; it is as disproportionate ambition. "Deluded by my foolish pride, I believed myself made to dispel all these illusions." Rousseau thus indicates a portion of responsibility in his transformation: "judging that in order to get myself listened to, I had to

<sup>6</sup> Denis Diderot, *Réfutation d'un ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé de l'homme*, in *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. J. Assézat and Maurice Tourneux, 20 vols. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875–1877), 2:285.

<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, *La Muse allobroge*, in OC 2:1890, n.1123; *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in OC 3:1; *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, in OC 1:657.

<sup>8</sup> Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, in OC 1:417. Rousseau hesitates regarding how long his state of exaltation lasted. *Confessions*, OC 1:351: "this effervescence sustained itself in my heart during four or five years to as high a degree as it has ever been in the heart of any man"; OC 1:416: "... for the four years at least that this effervescence lasted."

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

make my conduct accord with my principles, I adopted the singular behavior that I have not been permitted to follow.”<sup>10</sup>

In this effort to harmonize his conduct and his principles, one finds again the motive for this integrity, which was outrageously mocked in Parisian circles. Saint-Preux makes do with deploring that it no longer exists; Rousseau sets himself the task of making it live again. It is in practicing it that he expected to make himself heard. The signing of his works is not at all an editorial detail, and Christopher Kelly has brought an existential decision to light: signing is the obligatory corollary of reform. Integrity begins there. Rousseau becomes the one who upholds his writings through his name, as he upholds his ideas through his person, daring to appear in society without white linen or powdered wig, in order to become, even to his clothing, the visible and living challenge to inequality. In doing this, Rousseau seeks not to be admired for himself, but to make himself admirable so that his thought becomes audible. Because the fusion of thought, word, and action is what is distinctive to virtue, he effectively got closer to virtue. “Until then I had been good; from then on I became virtuous, or at least intoxicated by virtue.”<sup>11</sup> The fusion of thought, word, and action does not create a reunion with oneself; quite the contrary. It intoxicates, it transports beyond oneself, it hurls one outside of nature. Even for the man who consecrates his life to truth, integrity will prove to be untenable.

*The Confessions* and the *Reveries*, besides, keep the register of the incongruities of the self and of the inconsistencies of behavior. Thus, for example, of the day when Rousseau, invited to the opera by M. de Francueil, gives him the slip, not without the baseness, as greedy as it is stupid, of getting himself reimbursed for his ticket at the entrance. “Since nothing was ever more distant from my temperament than that action, I note it to show that there are moments of a kind of delirium, when one should not judge men by their actions.”<sup>12</sup> What he discovers, following the course of these accidents of behavior, is that there exists a difference between integrity and authenticity. If one cannot always judge men by their acts, the project of always making one’s acts conform to words must prove impracticable. It paralyzes what is living, which is unpredictable and fallible; it closes it up within what must be held as a veracious role: “I played at nothing; I became in effect such as I appeared.”

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 39.

Rousseau effectively raised himself above his natural temperament and does not moderate praises for himself: “nothing great and beautiful can enter a man’s heart, that I was not capable of between Heaven and me.”<sup>13</sup> Retrospectively, however, in this sublime moment, he does not recognize himself.

From 1762 onwards, with the four *Letters to Malesherbes*, Rousseau takes on an autobiographical habit which he will not cease ploughing, retouching, and readjusting until the end of his life, the justification for which is his primary motive, at least until the *Rêveries*: “When he saw himself disfigured among men to the point of being taken for a monster, his conscience, which made him feel within himself more good than bad, gave him the courage that perhaps he alone had, and will ever have, to show himself such as he was.”<sup>14</sup> It seems to him imperative that he clarify his character and his conduct, for the comprehension of his person is the key to understanding his system. He begins by justifying himself, to one person in the case of the four letters, to humanity united at the foot of the celestial throne in the case of *The Confessions*.

During this last enterprise, Rousseau exposed secrets which, still in our day, offend decency and unsettle the moral sense. They revolted even his old supporters. Thus Mme. de Boufflers, who attends one of its first readings, takes umbrage at the baseness of the work and the author: “These infamous memoirs are worthy of a farmyard servant.” Mme. de Boufflers, who had taken Hume’s side in the violent quarrel between him and Rousseau, had every reason to be furious with the character Rousseau has her play in *The Confessions*. But it is not only offended friendship which expresses itself. It is the sentiment of caste. Rousseau confesses to having worn livery (“I was dressed in her servants’ color”),<sup>15</sup> which is a certificate of indignity: during the ancien régime the servants in livery did not have the right to enter the theaters. During the Revolution, they will not have the right to vote. To wear livery is not a job; it is a degradation. Now this degradation Rousseau puts on without hesitating, detailing how he became a knave under his first master’s iron rod. “The vilest tastes, the basest delinquencies succeeded my pleasant amusements, without my having any idea of it.”<sup>16</sup> He describes the mechanism of becoming hardened to blows: “I found that stealing and being

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>14</sup> *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, Second Dialogue, in OC 1:903.

<sup>15</sup> *Confessions*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 30.

beaten went together, and in some way constituted a state...With this idea, I set about stealing more tranquilly than before. I said to myself: What will come of it, after all? I will be beaten. So be it: I am made to be."<sup>17</sup> Rousseau understood at full cost that servitude degrades humankind; he learned it while being damaged. He confesses that he contracted flaws that are the lot of the servile condition, "vices that I would have hated, such as lying, servitude, theft."<sup>18</sup> Joined to the avarice of which he accuses himself elsewhere, Rousseau confirms in his portrait all of Mme. de Boufflers's prejudices, with this capital difference, which is the historical dimension. Souls have a history; a servant has the soul of a servant only because he has been put in the situation of acquiring one, that is to say of degrading himself. "Covetousness and powerlessness always lead there."<sup>19</sup>

On the whole, Rousseau's career is that of a redemptive comprehension. The strength to analyze the hardships he went through—and that the immense majority of the poor go through more or less, reduced as he was to powerlessness and covetousness—confer an eminent dignity upon his words. "In whatever obscurity I may have lived, if I have thought more and better than Kings, history of my soul is more interesting than that of theirs."<sup>20</sup> But understanding history does not amount to abolishing it. Rousseau speaks in the present of his inclination for petty thefts, a "fantasy which until then had never occurred to me, and of which I have not been able to cure myself since then."<sup>21</sup> If he allows us to conceive of knavery as an accident of the soul, that does not prevent that the accident occurred, and that the flaw once acquired becomes a part of him. He is subject to it: "I was thus a knave, and sometimes I still am regarding trifles which tempt me and that I prefer to take than to ask for."<sup>22</sup>

If degradation has a history, so does comprehension.

Rousseau was not always himself; he did not come out fully armed from Jupiter's skull; he learned during the course of harsh but also of gentle lessons. *The Confessions* allow us to see how, before he was the one who had the energy to condemn corrupt society, he adhered to it to the point of wanting to play a role in it. To silence his critics, he had already said it in the preface

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Ébauches des Confessions*, in OC 1:1150.

<sup>21</sup> *Confessions*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 38.

to *Narcissus*. They accused him of condemning the fine arts while practicing them. He replies by emphasizing the difference in the times: “It is not surprising that during these times of prejudice and error when I so esteemed the quality of author, I sometimes aspired to acquire it myself.... One would be wrong at least to accuse me of contradicting in that principles which were not yet mine.”<sup>23</sup> *The Confessions* open a window on this time without principles, which was also that of the happiness of youth. In 1764, it is no longer in the mode of polemic, but of confession, that he recounts his first lapses. His initial uprooting from Geneva concerns religion together with patriotism, two dimensions which are inevitably linked to Calvin’s city.

First indication. The young runaway is quickly on his way, in the days that follow his departure from the city, to a converting priest, two leagues from Geneva (or approximately eight kilometers). “The priest’s name was M. de Pontverre. This name, famous in the history of the Republic, struck me very much. I was curious to see how the descendants of the gentlemen of the spoon were made.” Alain Grosrichard has added an enlightening note to this passage, which is left enigmatic in the Pléiade edition of Rousseau’s works: these gentlemen are members of a “brotherhood which, in the sixteenth century in the Vaud region, assembled Catholic lords who wore a spoon hung around their necks to ‘eat those in Geneva.’”<sup>24</sup> Of course, Rousseau is only fifteen in March 1728 when he seeks hospitality from the priest in Confignon. And one can accept the motive he gives for his adventurous undertaking: curiosity. Going to see the leader of the enemy, or rather his descendant, is not yet to go over to the enemy. Fifteen years later, the same excuses are no longer valid when he attempts to have Micheli du Crest’s analysis of Geneva’s fortifications transmitted to the Duke of Savoy.

At the time Rousseau is employed by the Savoy land registry, and according to the account in *The Confessions*, it is in order to shine in the opinion of the director of the Chambéry land registry, Pierre-Louis-Clément Coccelli, that he presents him with a printed copy which he found at his Uncle Gabriel’s after the latter’s death. Micheli du Crest had printed about fifty copies of this work,<sup>25</sup> which revealed the weaknesses in Geneva’s defenses, and had

<sup>23</sup> *Préface de Narcisse*, in OC 2:962–63.

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, ed. Alain Grosrichard, 2 vols. (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 2012), 1, comments: “just as one says in French *bouffer du curé*.” (“To gorge on priests” means violent anticlericalism.) Cf. the definition of this brotherhood in *Lettre à d’Alembert*, in OC 5:110n2.

<sup>25</sup> According to Monique and Bernard Cottret, Rousseau speaks of two hundred copies, which, in diminishing the confidential character of the work, somewhat attenuates his offense. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau en son temps* (Paris: Perrin, 2005), 89.

sent some to several members of the Little and the Grand Councils. In their biography of Rousseau, Monique and Bertrand Cottret do not doubt that Cocelli in fact transmitted to Turin this “highly confidential” report, “which today would come under defense secrets.”<sup>26</sup> Rousseau gives as an explanation for his act the desire to shine in the opinion of a superior and to “prove [to him] that I belonged to the notables of Geneva who knew secrets of State”;<sup>27</sup> meanwhile he does not hide that this is a “very serious matter.” For in so doing, he revealed the weaknesses in Geneva’s defense to a powerful enemy which had already attempted to lay siege to the city, without succeeding in making it yield.

Now Rousseau cannot be unaware of this. The Day of Scaling the Walls, which is celebrated on December 12, commemorates the victory of the Protestant Republic over the Catholic troops in 1602. The soldiers of Duke Charles-Emmanuel the First of Savoy had attempted to scale the walls of the city during the night, and were repelled by the besieged. The Day of the Scaling of the Walls became a national holiday; Rousseau alludes to it in the *Letter to d’Alembert*.<sup>28</sup> With his friend Lenieps, he never failed to celebrate it in Paris, and kept up this habit until the end of his life. There is no doubt that he knows the importance of the fortifications for his native city. He could not misunderstand the gravity of his act.

As Yves Touchefeu remarks, Rousseau’s account designedly scrambles the chronology: transmission of the report is supposed to have taken place at an undetermined time, but prior to the riots of 1737, to which Rousseau, passing through Geneva, was a horrified witness. These scenes of civil war would have revived a patriotism to which he had eventually become indifferent during the course of his wandering life, and it is this indifference which explains “a very serious event that I forgot to put in its place, and which should not be omitted.”<sup>29</sup> Now this *paralepsis* is an inaccuracy. As it happens, Yves Touchefeu indicates, it is at the end of summer 1738 that Jean-Jacques tries to inform his Aunt Bernard “that he is ready to pay their genuine price for some interesting manuscripts.”<sup>30</sup> It is therefore not before but after the riots

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Confessions*, 217.

<sup>28</sup> *Lettre à d’Alembert*, in OC 5: 110n3.

<sup>29</sup> *Confessions*, 216.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R. A. Leigh, 50 vols. (Geneva-Oxford: SVEC, 1965–1988), 22, “To Clermonde Fazy,” end of August—beginning of October 1738, cited by Yves Touchefeu, *L’Antiquité et le christianisme dans la pensée de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Oxford:

that the transmission of the report took place. If his patriotism was revived during the disturbances (which is not impossible) he was not equal to curbing his impulses to commit treason. His future prospects were then with the enemy: near Mme. de Warens, on Catholic land. At that time, his Genevan patriotism is tentative at best, clearly counterbalanced by the attraction of the great French power.

Alain Grosrichard sets February 1738 as the date of the probable composition of the “Verger de Madame la baronne de Warens,” a long poem of gratitude to his benefactress, during the course of which Rousseau invites the “blind citizens” of Geneva to rejoin the Catholic denomination:

Enjoy the benefits that Louis grants you,  
Recall within your walls that ancient concord.  
Happy! If returning to the faith of your forebears,  
You never forget to be free like them.<sup>31</sup>

One can smile to see Rousseau, who abandoned the religion of his father and mother ten years ago, invite his fellow citizens to return to the faith of their forebears which, in the context, can only signify Catholicism. The periphrasis is adroit, and his compatriots could be fooled by it. Of course, not having abandoned the Protestant denomination, the Genevans cannot *return* to it, properly speaking. They could, however, imagine that Rousseau quite simply summons them, after the riots and the spilled blood, to become Christians again. Inserted in a poem of homage to a converted lady, who in addition draws a pension for making new converts, the faith of the forebears points toward the Geneva from before Calvin: one can always go back in time to the more ancestral. (From the perspective of dogma, the argument is not convincing, for if we had automatically to rejoin the most ancient of the ancestors, humanity would soon have returned to paganism.)

Lastly, to conclude the question of his youthful indecision, the letter to M. Parisot, dated from 1742, contains two verses, of which the continuation of the work will be the palinode:

It would not be good in society  
If there were between the ranks less inequality.<sup>32</sup>

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Voltaire Foundation, 1999), 83.

<sup>31</sup> Rousseau, “Le Verger de Madame la baronne de Warens,” in *OC* 2:1129.

<sup>32</sup> Rousseau, “Epître à Monsieur Parisot,” in *OC* 2:1140.

He who issues this verdict is not a young runaway, but a man of letters in his thirties who considers that he has learned how to keep to his place in society. In this poetic epistle, Rousseau also admits that he has not always thought like this. He admits that he had as his own, initially

those ferocious maxims,  
Of native prejudice the bitter and precocious fruit  
Which from their younger years, by their acrid leaven,  
Feed the pride of Republican hearts.<sup>33</sup>

Yet he also proclaims that he has “forever” abjured this “native prejudice” in favor of equality. The rediscovery of ancient republicanism in 1749 when, in tears, he scribbles under a tree on the avenue in Vincennes the prosopopeia of Fabricius, is the recantation of a recantation. That is what gives it its stupefying force. Rousseau at first did all he could to adapt himself to hierarchical society, not only in deed and word, but also in thought. He adopted the point of view of the powerful so as to see himself as they saw him: “proud little runt” with a “burlesque pride.” The letter to Parisot proves that, judging resistance to be futile, he first renounced his family and civic convictions:

Will I here in my vain craze play  
The great declaimer, the new Don Quixote,  
Destiny on earth has settled the stations  
And will surely not change them for me.<sup>34</sup>

By renouncing republican equality, he bent before necessity. The inequality of conditions is not maintained by reasons, it is just there. He sees in it the effect of destiny, and this destiny is stronger than he. When one pictures Rousseau today, one no longer imagines his extreme malleability. Between him and us, his work interposes, and it is rather rigidity which strikes us, the constancy and force with which he refused the mores and manners of the aristocracy of his time. Before denouncing them, however, he had sought to adopt them. The young man who roams the streets of Chambéry to give music lessons was pleased to carry the sword. Mme. de Warens, who would like to make a presentable gentleman out of him, pays for fencing and dancing lessons for him.<sup>35</sup> Certainly the retrospective account of *The Confessions* insists on his fundamental inaptitude in these fields; on the other hand, the long poem that on the spur of the moment he dedicates to his benefactress shows the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Confessions*, 200. This is not an exception. In the *Refutation of a Work by Helvetius*, Diderot indicates that he also took lessons at the beginning of his Parisian youth, during a quite penniless time of his life.

ardor of his conversion. This is not only a conversion to Catholicism, but also an adoption of the values, beliefs, and manners of the vast society for which his new denomination prepares and matches him: the Duchy of Savoy and beyond that, France. For a man with talents, which he is at that time, the kingdom is a land of opportunities.

It is because he rushed headlong into this mirage and that he was wounded by it, that he became the inflexible judge of the reality that his dream covered up—French civilization: the misery of the people, the frivolity of the rich, the lie that is the arts. Corrupt civilization is a lure: it is because he was a fish on the hook that he knows it. He will no longer budge from this view. All the objections that the Parisian salons may raise in the '50s, not only to his theses but to his person, he raised against himself ten years earlier. That is why he is perfectly immunized against the reproaches that he is idealistic and ridiculous. He is no longer fixed on the idea of being treated as a Don Quixote, because fear of this has long restrained him, without profit. Between the letter to Parisot and the prosopopeia of Fabricius, seven years have passed, seven years of misfortune and disappointments, as much in Paris as in Venice. Thus the republican egalitarianism which issues from the illumination of Vincennes was tempered in adversity. Rousseau does his midlife crisis in reverse. To the contrary of people who have reached a mature age, he adores what he has burned, and his rediscovery of republican virtues is accompanied by a sentiment new to him: the sentiment of his power. Rousseau straightens himself up after having bent down for a long time. Destiny has ceased to be contrary to him; he is no longer made to be beaten.

The haughtiness, the deliberate impertinence, and sometimes the violence of his rejoinders, during the epoch of his reform, give the impression of a rigid construction, as if Rousseau had donned armor in order to confront the society that celebrates him. He was defenseless when he was unknown; he puts on armor when he becomes famous. If he shows himself to be inflexible in success, it is because he must defend his work. His duty is to demonstrate to the world that he toiled not for success but in order to make perceptible to everyone what he has discovered and recovered for himself, that is to say, liberty.

If one takes him for a man with talents, the work is immediately devalued. It becomes a *jeu d'esprit*. And if one believes that the author is self-seeking, it is worse yet: the work turns into lies, it becomes a lucrative denunciation, a usurious indictment. It is thus a point of honor with him not to *arrive* in

the society of his time, so that no one can see in him a social climber; his maturity redeems his youth, or rather comments on it.

One finds the best commentary on the attraction Rousseau could have formerly in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, where Julie's Francophilia retrospectively acquits the career of the one who did not stay in Switzerland. For not everything is to be rejected. In the radiance of France, there are not only rhinestones, even if there are some: "she made a few remarks on the disposition of this gentle and benevolent nation that all hate, and which hates none."<sup>36</sup> It is important that the gentle Julie be under the influence of this glamour: by being under its influence, she clears the name of her author. She shows that the dream of France can have a disinterested character, with those who know the country only by its books and by its foreign policy, which has effectively ceased to be expansionist after the death of Louis XIV. Julie is rich and fixed in place—she is the only character in the novel who does not travel. She therefore does not need to seek her fortune in the great kingdom; she never encounters French reality, contrary to Saint-Preux who, in his Parisian letters, details the shocks of his disillusionment. The hero who is poor, and who goes forth to seek a career, knows the gap between the image of France seen from afar and the corruption he discovers in cultivated and worldly circles. Doubtless Julie is mistaken regarding a nation about which she does nothing but dream. By persisting in her error, despite the vitriolic descriptions of her lover, she proves the disinterested character of the dream of France. Now, no less than the act of signing, disinterest is crucial.

Rousseau three times avoided or refused a royal pension: the one which Louis XV was ready to grant him after the success of the *Devin du Village*, the one that Frederick of Prussia proposes to him through the mediation of milord Maréchal during his exile in Bern, and, lastly, the one that Hume solicited for him from George III during his stay in England. Most certainly he is anxious about tomorrow, to the point of saying that he is avaricious. In the second part of his life, besides, he is less frightened for himself than for his companion: upon what will Thérèse live after his death? This question rightly haunts him: he had every reason to fear for her the misery into which she again finally sank. But if he is anxious for his companion, Rousseau is even more anxious about compromising himself with the established powers. How will his behavior be judged? What shadow will fall upon the interpretation of his work, and on his capacity to carry on with it? "How to dare speak from

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<sup>36</sup> Rousseau, *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, vol. 3, in OC 3:559.

now on about independence and disinterest? In receiving this pension there would no longer be any need for anything but to flatter or be quiet.<sup>37</sup> Fear of being muzzled by money or discredited by it is constant, and his defensive posture never relaxes. However much he may proclaim his independence, what one might think of him anguishes him to the point of hardening his position. This hardening only concerns what is external. Within his work, he is on the contrary supple, animated, inventive. He displays authority in staging his ideas, raising the curtain on the first mornings of the world: "I see an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but all things considered, the most advantageously organized of all; I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak, quenching his thirst at the first stream."<sup>38</sup> He is the one who unveils, as much if not more than he is the one who demonstrates, he who dares the masterful gesture of setting aside the facts in order to return to the origin. This extreme authority is not rigid; it does not exclude liveliness; it gives occasion for it. As proof, he leaps into the history that he is writing, showing by his vivacity that natural man is not likely to bear chains, and that he will escape his persecutor if he has the misfortune to encounter one: "I take twenty steps into the forest, my fetters are broken, and he never sees me again in his life." One has to ask oneself why it took the avowal, made in the *Dialogues*, to understand that Rousseau had found the portrait of natural man in his own heart. Twenty years before he wrote the *Dialogues*, he had already painted himself as the man whom nothing can chain up, giving to the philosophical *I* a novel incarnation, leaping and liberating: he who in twenty steps escapes into the forest, is not the demonstrative and reflective *I* of the *Discourse on Method*. He does not intend to found knowledge; he refutes men's original sociability for the sake of their liberty.

Rousseau created stories of metamorphoses of the self, each of which illustrates the link between life and work, but from different angles: during his reform, the exemplarity of a life whose vocation is to prove the truth of the work. Life is required in order to support the work. At the time of *The Confessions*, it is rather a matter of showing how the vagaries of his unpredictable life led to ideas that his contemporaries cannot assimilate. From this perspective, life does not support the work, but leads to it. Rousseau no longer relies on integrity, judged to be above his strength, in order to accredit his theses, but instead on an absolute veracity to make his person loved. He hoped that by showing himself without hiding anything, he would protect his work from

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<sup>37</sup> *Confessions*, 380.

<sup>38</sup> Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, in *OC* 3:134–35.

malign interpretations. The true account must reestablish, via the evidence of innocence, the clarity of the work which was compromised by the conspiracy. So Rousseau exposes himself, as no one has ever dared to do before him, but in the conviction that he was making himself impervious to attack. Jacques Julliard is right to call him “the most enigmatic figure of his age”:<sup>39</sup> the more he strips naked, the less it is possible to attack him; the less it is permissible to ask him to provide explanations that he has already given.

One can hardly imagine states of consciousness more opposed than the self under tension, at the time of his reform, or the relaxed self of the *Reveries* when, through wisdom or despair, Rousseau unbound himself from his work, renouncing its defense even while prolonging it. Meanwhile, he will have tried two distinct strategies: stripping naked, and putting himself on trial. “Rousseau tries to make himself impregnable,” Claude Lefort said to me when I was turning over in my mind in front of him some of the citations and hypotheses that I have set out here.

I did not understand the meaning of his remark, and I asked him to be more specific: “Impregnable? Do you mean like the pervert whose behavior and motives no one can guess? Impregnable in his system like the spider in its web, to take up again the image that Rousseau was not afraid to use when he describes the self and invites it to draw itself inward: ‘Let us measure the radius of our sphere, and let us stay at the center like the insect in the middle of its web.’”<sup>40</sup>

“No,” Lefort replied. “That was not at all what I had in mind. He seeks to escape the grip of others. He makes himself impregnable in order to remain free.”

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<sup>39</sup> Jacques Julliard, *Les gauches françaises, 1762–2012 : Histoire, politique et imaginaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 118.

<sup>40</sup> Rousseau, *Émile*, book 2, in *OC* 4:305.

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