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Rousseau's Wandering Mind

In any literary project, the hardest sentence to write is the first one, and, in this case, the subject sets the standard: Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a master of the exquisite opening line. *The Social Contract* begins with the lapidary statement, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” The first sentence of *Émile* reads, “All is good leaving the hands of the Author of things, all degenerates in the hands of man.” And Rousseau artfully opens the foreword of his memoir, *Confessions*, with an astonishing declaration. “Here,” he writes, “is the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that exists and probably will ever exist.”

Confessions appeared in the 1780s, two centuries after the publication of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, and Rousseau knew the earlier work well. In the preface, Montaigne had written, “I want to be seen in my simple, natural, and ordinary way, without study and artifice: because it is I whom I depict...I am myself the matter of my book.” Nonetheless, Rousseau launches *Confessions* with the claim that his enterprise is unexampled and its accomplishment inimitable. He explains, “I want to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and that man will be me.” My fellows: *mes semblables*, peers, equals, counterparts, people like me. What sets Rousseau's *Confessions* apart, in his own mind, is his conviction that he is incomparable. “Myself alone,” he says. “I know my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those whom I have seen; I dare believe I am not made like any of those who exist.”

It may well be true that Rousseau was unique; he had singular talent and distinctive quirks. In my reading, however, his memoir is remarkable, neither for his idiosyncrasies in themselves, nor for his stated intention to be transparent, but for his courage in the execution: he does not flinch from recounting the

most embarrassing behavior and disgraceful decisions. “It is not what is criminal that costs the most to say,” he attests, “it is what is ridiculous and shameful.” In fact, where most of us are driven by the need for acknowledgment, acceptance, approval, Rousseau says he was far more sensitive to shame than to praise or, for that matter, punishment. “I feared only shame,” he writes; “but I feared it more than death, more than crime, more than anything in the world.” There is, perversely, much to admire in him when, contrary to his strongest instinct, he describes his dishonorable actions. He flatters himself at the expense of his predecessor:

I had always laughed at the false naiveté of Montaigne, who, pretending to admit his faults, takes great pains to give himself only amiable ones; whereas I, who always believed myself, and still believe myself, all things considered, the best of men, felt that there is no human interior, however pure it may be, which does not conceal some odious vice.

Both Montaigne and Rousseau were privileged to have the necessary time and solitude for writing, the former because he inherited his father’s house and fortune, the latter because he was often unemployed. Montaigne was settled, especially during the seven-year period when he wrote *Essays*. He suffered intensely from renal colic (another legacy from his father), and he was subject to motion sickness, which made coaches, litters, and boats intolerable. However, Montaigne rode horses with relative comfort—he said he could ride for eight or ten hours without dismounting—and, when he left his library, he had long conversations with himself on horseback. For his part, Rousseau occasionally accepted the loan of a horse (he said he was almost as pleased to be on a horse as on foot), but he preferred to walk. “The ambulatory life,” he said, “is the life I need.” He thought while walking, whether on one of his many long trips across the continent or on an afternoon hike wherever he happened to land. “Walking,” he writes, “has something that animates and enlivens my ideas; I can hardly think when I stay in place; my body has to be in motion to get my mind moving.”

Rousseau is already familiar as one of the great modern political philosophers, a social contract theorist on a par with Hobbes and Locke, a critical thinker whose insights are still cited with approval in studies of inequality. He has a prior claim on our attention, and coming to know him as the person he puts forward in *Confessions* is time well spent. In addition, however, this work has much to teach us about the psychological and spiritual snares of the apologetic memoir, the intimate history whose motto is truth but whose objective is vindication. Rousseau chooses the phrase, “*Intus et in cute,*” inwardly and under the skin, as an epigraph. He would have us see him as he is, as he knows himself to be, a flawed man but a simple, honest one whose heart is in the right place. To that end, he makes a commitment to withhold no biographical details that might help the reader understand him. “I have promised to depict myself such as I am,” he says; “and, to know me in my later years, it is necessary to have known me well in my youth.” In so doing, he sets the reader to meandering alongside him.

Rousseau learned of the contest for which he would write the first *Discourse* while looking over a literary magazine on the road to Vincennes. The Académie de Dijon proposed the question whether the progress of the sciences and the arts had contributed to corrupting or purifying morals. “At the instant of this reading,” Rousseau says, “I saw another universe, and I became another man.” He has a lively memory of the impression he received in that ecstatic experience, but he does not recall the details. They are lost, he claims, because he described them in a letter, and, once he has committed something to paper, he forgets it. Yet, I suspect that Rousseau is mistaken both in identifying this forgetting as “a singularity of [his] memory” and in attributing it to his having recorded the event in writing. It may rather be the case that the ego, the subject who remembers, is eclipsed at the instant of illumination. In addition, a sudden insight is simply inarticulable in the moment; it can only be expressed in words, one syllable following another, through a process that is as much elaboration as it is recollection. Moreover, at some level of consciousness, his recollection of Bossey, the Swiss town where he’d spent his adolescent years, as a lost

paradise may have laid the groundwork for his benign, indeed, romantic view of humanity's original condition in the first times.

In any case, Rousseau's intuition took possession of him. What he distinctly remembers is arriving at Vincennes in a state of agitation that verged on delirium. Humanity had sacrificed its natural simplicity, happiness, and goodness to cultural progress, and the result is all too visible in civilized society, where mistrust, umbrage, hatred, and betrayal hide behind the veil of politeness. He turned his nightly insomnia to advantage in composing his prize-winning *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. Eyes closed, he turned passages over in his mind until he was satisfied with their wording, and then committed them to memory until he could get them on paper. But he found that the business of rising and dressing in the morning made him lose a great deal, so he waited until the mother of his paramour came into the room, and, still abed, dictated the night's work to her.

The illumination of Vincennes, and the immersion in work that followed it, would not be the only time Rousseau was carried away with an idea or given over to a single occupation. Once piqued, he had a one-track mind. He recognized this tendency towards hyperfocus in himself. "Thus it is," he said, "with all the tastes to which I start to give myself up: they swell, become passions, and soon I do not see anything in the world other than the amusement with which I am occupied." In another era, he might have been considered neurodivergent.

Certainly, he was maladroit in social situations. He was quite unable to engage in repartee, a regrettable deficiency in the salon society of his times: "One would say my heart and my mind belonged to different individuals." And, rather than remaining silent when he had nothing to offer, he would let slip whatever came to mind, babble foolishly, blurt out inanities. "Wishing to overcome or conceal my ineptitude," he concedes, "I seldom fail to put it on display." In the moment, sensations overwhelmed him. Of anything people said or did, of anything that happened in his presence, he felt nothing, penetrated nothing, the external signs alone struck him, the indecipherable words he heard, the enigmatic actions he

witnessed. “But later all that comes back to me, I recall the place, the time, the tone, the look, the gesture, the circumstances; nothing gets away from me. Then, from what people said or did, I discover what they thought, and rarely am I mistaken.” Only in retrospect could he interpret social interactions. He was made, he says, for leisurely meditation in solitude, not for speaking, acting, doing business with other people. “Nature, which gave me the first talent, refused me the second.”

It is no wonder, then, that Rousseau was footloose, that he loved to roam the countryside alone, admire the prospects, dream, think, remember, jot down ideas in his notebook. Preparing to write the second *Discourse*, he went on a seven- or eight-day excursion in St. Germain, which he describes as one of the most pleasant walks of his life. The weather was delightful, and, deep in the forest, he sought and found the image of the first times. “Exalted by these contemplations,” he says, “my soul was raised close to the Divinity.” The deity of the Enlightenment, the flick-of-the-finger God who set the world a-spinning, was to be praised for the breathtaking beauty of his creation, the mountainsides, pastures, and woods Rousseau discovered while meditating or daydreaming in the course of his endless rambles.

Rousseau’s political essays are the product of sustained reflection, yet he had difficulty concentrating. “Once I have followed several pages of an author who has to be read with application,” he writes, “my mind gives it up and gets lost in the clouds.” It is a slippery slope to armchair-diagnose neurodivergence in a long-dead figure, but modern insights into the many ways humans perceive the world, whether it is the autism spectrum or ADHD, offers new insight into the way his mind worked. “But,” he continues, “let different subjects succeed one another, even without interruption, one relaxes me from the other, and, without needing a break, I follow them more easily.” Thus he organized his studies to accommodate his learning style. Far from bemoaning his restlessness, he reveled in it. “I love to occupy myself in doing trifles,” he writes, “in starting a hundred things and accomplishing none, in coming and going as my head chirps to me...and in following, in all things, only the caprice of the moment.”

Despite this distractibility, he was largely self-taught, and he adopted what proved to be an effective approach to reading a book: he gave himself over to it without reservation, entered the author's universe of discourse, followed the author's arguments without finding fault or interjecting different ideas. In other words, Rousseau read, not critically, but sympathetically and respectfully. In this way, he furnished his mind, so that, in the end, he could think for himself—or, more accurately, discover what he thought—without returning to others' works, for he had already mastered them, or resorting to arguments from authority, for he had confidence in his own reasoning.

But Rousseau came to have a further reason to prefer the solitude of the country to the life of a controversial writer in the city: by the mid-1760s, when he started to write *Confessions*, he had grown more than somewhat apprehensive. (“But time is gaining on me,” he complains, “spies are hassling me; I am forced to execute hastily and poorly a work that would call for the leisure and tranquility I lack.”) And, in fact, he was gossiped about in society, misrepresented in the press, harassed in public, and ultimately hounded from place to place for his perceived moral shortcomings as well as his progressive political ideas. He wrote his memoirs to make his inner life known, tell “the story of [his] soul,” set the record straight for posterity. “I have only one thing to fear in this enterprise,” he said: “it is not saying too much or telling lies, but, rather, not saying everything, and suppressing truths.”

A case in point: Rousseau candidly admits to having had the midwife deliver his children to the foundling's hospital in Paris. The first time, he told himself that it was the custom of the country, an accepted practice that, as a resident, he could very well follow, and he persuaded the child's mother that it was the only way to protect her maidenly honor. As a precaution, he made two copies of an encrypted message and put one of them in the infant's clothing. (This measure proved ineffective: long afterward, Mme. de Luxembourg tried to retrieve the child but was unable to locate him.) “The following year,” he resumes, “same inconvenience, same expedient, except for the cipher, which was overlooked.” In total, he sent five nameless babies to the Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés. He never saw any of them again.

It is not my place to condemn Rousseau for spurning the children; he might have done far worse than entrusting them to a charitable institution. But he did not take pains to keep the resettlement of his children a secret. He told some of his friends about it, “solely,” he says, “in order to enlighten them, so as not to seem, in their eyes, better than I was.” Word got around, and the man who dreaded shame was smartly criticized by his contemporaries. His defense is telling.

“It is not when a wicked action has just been done that it torments us, it is when, long afterward, we recall it; for the memory is not at all extinguished.” Rousseau says the choice he made with regard to the children never left his heart tranquil. At one point he declines to set forth his reasons for fear of leading impressionable young readers into what he called “the same error,” as though his dereliction were a mistake in logic or arithmetic. In another passage he says, “My fault is great, but it is an error; I neglected my duties, but the desire to harm did not enter my heart.” His fault was weakness, not malice. He shuddered at the idea of placing the illegitimate children with their mother’s ill-bred family, to be raised even worse; education at Enfants-Trouvés was much less risky. And he goes to an extreme that finally raises the question of good faith: “I didn’t see anything wrong with it. Everything considered, I chose the best, or what I thought best, for my children. I would have wished, I would still wish, to have been raised and nourished as they were.”

He promised his confession, he declares, not his justification, and he resolves not to say anything else on the subject of his offspring. “It is for me to be true and for the reader to be just. I will never ask anything more of him.” But he cannot let it go (and he will bring it up yet again in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*). More than once, reprising an argument that is traceable to Montaigne, he contends that paternal instincts are stifled when one doesn’t know the children. Montaigne could not surrender to instincts that are produced in us without the intervention of judgment. In particular, he said,

I cannot accept that passion with which one embraces children scarcely born, having neither movement in the soul nor recognizable form in the body, whereby they can make themselves

likeable: and I did not willingly suffer them to nurse near me. A true and well-regulated affection should emerge and increase with the knowledge of themselves that they give us; and then, if they are worth it, the natural propensity advancing in step with reason, it should cherish them with a truly paternal attachment....

Yet, Rousseau realized this was a weak excuse. “The reflection I make here,” he allowed, “may extenuate my offenses in their effect, but it aggravates them in their source.” In plain language, he would have come to know and love his children had he not sent them away at birth. He falls into magical thinking: “The remorse finally became so sharp that it almost tore from me a public avowal of my fault at the beginning of *Émile*, and the characteristic is so clear that, after such a passage, it is surprising anyone would have had the courage to reproach me.” *Almost*. There is, actually, no such admission in his widely read guidebook for the ideal education of children, and, accordingly, no reason for him to be nonplussed by society’s disapproval.

So, here is the tangle: Rousseau is sorry, indeed, he is mortified for having failed, repeatedly, to meet the conventional obligations of fatherhood, yet, all the same, he maintains that committing the children to the foundling’s hospital was a good, sensible, legitimate arrangement. Indeed, turning them over to public education was an act of citizenship: “I saw myself as a member of Plato’s republic.” His rue, his reasons: here, too, one might think his heart and his head belonged to different individuals. What sort of confession is this, where excuses lessen the offense and embarrassment stands in for contrition? But when Rousseau picks up his pen, he does not seek absolution. Writing is not a sacrament. He looks, rather, for empathy and equity, implores, if you will, the reader’s indulgence. Then he goes for a walk.