

Acknowledgements

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European Journeys: Introduction

by Servanne Woodward

This volume originated with a mainly philosophical bias, which was perhaps nearsighted. I began to think in contrasting terms. Descartes wrote his *Discourse on Method* in a sort of hibernation, locked in a warm closet or an oven (depending on the translation). It is well known that his autobiography, to be found in the two first parts, gives an account of his intellectual development, prior to his travels and his soldier days. Initially, Descartes seems to trust inner thoughts over the perception of external objects. Rousseau's *Confessions*, meanwhile, are the story of their author's emotions, and his *Promenades* exemplify the consecrated philosophical walk that became regarded as a genre favorable to freedom of thought. Either the landscapes redress thoughts by giving them a less confined domestic space, so that thinking can expand freely closer to an original state or consciousness. The mind frame is expanded for a better self-understanding. Like so many of his contemporaries, Rousseau was a walker at a time when walking was becoming closely linked to thinking. Kant's clockwork comings and goings, for example, seem to indicate the precision of his thought. Members of eighteenth century society walked to display themselves, better to digest their food, to think, to improve themselves, and in order to find employment and wealth. The eighteenth century was also the age of obligatory journeys. Even Descartes, after all, was expected to complete his education by travelling.

At the same time, an article on Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun that I produced for *Dalhousie French Studies* made me consider self-writing in motion. As often happens, the orientation of that particular volume limited my thoughts, and made them fit within a unified framework. I therefore refused to force such a coherence upon the work of my colleagues in this project. The only criteria for acceptability

was that the article should be able to stand on its own, and be related to the topic. Beyond this I also had to respect my committee's decisions, and I am glad to report that their members were unanimous in their evaluations. I hope that the volume is the better for it. This does not, however, provide a direct answer to my original, and very particular, question.

As I reread the contributions to this volume, it occurs to me that the idea of the journey raises, albeit indirectly, the idea of "nation" as opposed to "foreignness"—at least the idea of the domestic versus the outside. Steven Hunsaker defines national identity as "shared language, traditions, and territory" (Hunsaker, *Autobiography & National* 1). The study of France alone reveals uneven orders between these three realms. Reviewing Anthony D. Smith and Walker Connor, Hunsaker finds that while one privileges "legal and economic organization," the other speaks in terms of "myth, memory, and common ancestry" (Hunsaker 2). Hunsaker eventually uses Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism" (NY: Verso, 1994), concluding that imagined communities are even "more idiosyncratic, complex, and divisive" than Anderson had posited (Hunsaker 4). Perhaps Montesquieu wrote the *Persian Letters* within this type of frame, although his Persians eventually seem quite Parisian. It could be that specifics disappear beneath universals.

Even in the modern context of a unified Europe, Jacques Derrida feels compelled to discourage the culture of difference for difference's sake:

S'il faut veiller à ce que l'hégémonie centralisatrice (la capitale) ne se reconstitue pas, il ne faut pas pour autant multiplier les frontières, c'est-à-dire les marches et les marges; il ne faut pas cultiver pour elles-mêmes les différences minoritaires, les idiolectes intraduisibles, les antagonismes nationaux, les chauvinismes de l'idiome. (Derrida, "L'autre cap" 45).

“L’a capitale et l’a-capitale,” or the antagonism towards Europe as a unified entity does not meet with Derrida’s approval (Derrida, “L’autre cap” 46). He would rather propose that it is a history of openness to other cultures that defines Europe. In the eighteenth century, travel was certainly an integral part of education, and Italy was the compulsory destination of visual artists.

The “journeys” that this volume proposes are local and of limited scope. The volume itself presents the case by case historical journey of a handful of writer-travelers. It turns out that only European journeys have been retained by the reading committee. The collection of articles delimits the self as a literary representation (of self in motion, in translation.) New conceptions of autobiography as self-definition while leisurely wandering through Nature are canonized by Rousseau.

Rousseau categorizes two sorts of journey into Nature: his favorite of these implies the appreciation of the moment, and excludes writing, planning, directions and time. The appreciation of the moment abolishes time, and gives him that sense of self-elevation which he calls “hovering”:

Jamais je n’ai tant pensé, tant vécu, tant été moi, si j’ose ainsi dire, que dans ceux que j’ai faits seuls et à pied. La marche a quelque chose qui anime et avive mes idées: je ne puis presque penser quand je reste en place; il faut que mon corps soit en branle pour y mettre mon esprit. La vue de la campagne, la succession des aspects agréables, le grand air, le grand appétit, la bonne santé que je gagne en marchant, la liberté du cabaret, l’éloignement de tout ce qui me fait sentir ma dépendance, de tout ce qui me rappelle à ma situation, tout cela dégage mon ame, me donne une plus grande audace de penser, me jette en quelque sorte dans l’immensité des êtres pour les combiner, les choisir, me les approprier à mon

gré sans gêne et sans crainte. Je dispose en maître de la nature entière; mon cœur errant d'objet en objet s'unit, s'identifie à ceux qui le flatent, s'entoure d'images charmantes, s'enivre de sentimens délicieux. Si pour les fixer je m'amuse à les décrire en moi-même, quelle vigueur de pinceau, quelle fraîcheur de coloris, quelle énergie d'expression je leur donne! . . . pourquoi, direz-vous, ne les pas écrire? et pourquoi les écrire, vous répondrai-je: Pourquoi m'ôter le charme actuel de la jouissance pour dire à d'autres que j'avois joui? Que m'importoient des lecteurs, un public et toute la terre, tandis que je plânois dans le Ciel? (*Confessions* 162-63; Woodward, *Contributions* 71-72).

The journey into Nature frees Rousseau by depriving him of his *état civil*, indeed of society itself where he mostly experienced disappointment. To society, Rousseau opposed his perspective of Natural freedom and pleasures. The journey voluptuously affirmed his existence as a walker, an eater, emphasizing the pleasures of his body, of his senses and of his imagination. His preferred landscapes are sites of personal memories, and the accidented Alpine terrain which is perhaps reminiscent of the writer's homeland.

Moreover, Rousseau opposes this traveling practice with the more common tradition by which a traveler wrote a diary, usually accompanied by a painter who illustrated the journey. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, painter of Queen Marie-Antoinette, did indeed paint and describe her journeys—particularly in Switzerland, since it was the country of Rousseau and Mme de Staël. In her accounts, she attempts to merge the Rousseauistic journey with the conventional practice. She omits depictions of sites which have already been described by many other authors, and prides herself on describing less travelled paths, including the glaciers and mountain passes where she heroically and fearlessly trod.

The writing of the *Confessions* relates Nature and human

nature to Rousseau's own "nature," within the time frame of eternity—of the "Etre éternel" and the being eternal of humanity. Hence, unlike Vigée-Lebrun, who felt compelled to justify her writing by the social notoriety she achieved, the high society ladies she corresponded with and the crowned heads of Europe whom she painted, Rousseau revels in being socially non-existent throughout his journeys. This pleasure was unexpectedly reborn late in Rousseau's life when, after the fall at Ménilmontant which robbed him of the recollection even of his own name, he benefitted from the generosity and solidarity of the public (his natural due, he claimed) during this experience of being unknown. This was particularly pleasurable at a time when he was a social outcast. Despite the fact that he protested his own singularity, Rousseau believed his person to be essentially "universal," and hence expected to be universally received into the collective human bosom. Initially interested in Rousseau, Derrida may be thinking of these journeys when he writes: "Qu'elle prenne une forme nationale ou non, raffinée, hospitalière ou agressivement xénophobe, l'auto-affirmation d'une identité prétend toujours répondre à l'appel ou à l'assignation de l'universel" (Derrida, "L'autre cap" 71). Derrida continues: "Aucune identité culturelle ne se présente comme le corps opaque d'un idiome intraduisible mais toujours, au contraire, comme l'irremplaçable *inscription* de l'universel dans le singulier témoigner pour l'universalité" (Derrida, "L'autre cap" 71-72). This appreciation may or may not agree, however, with the views of other authors, even those of Rousseau's contemporaries. Diderot, for instance, seems to consider that representations of Nature are in accordance with a cultural sensibility which may be local and temporal—hence his interest in the rules of inter-personal relations and representational conventions which may promise more appreciative durability. Gérard Lahouati implies that Voltaire's disdain for Rousseau was based on the former's rejection of self-exposure for its own sake. This corresponds with the sensibility of the beginning

of the century, when self-expression was narrowly limited by the highly sociable epistolary rules, as previously practiced by Sévigné, who privileged the readers' interest over that of the author (Lahouati, "Autobiographie" note 23 p. 203).

Equally steeped in the seventeenth century, however, is the Cartesian model of thought in motion, or as motion, which may be found in Montaigne. The traveler makes chance self-discoveries within or outside the boundaries of the native culture to which the diary will report. Derrida expresses the recovery of one's identity in this moveable designation: "*Le propre d'une culture, c'est de n'être pas identique à elle-même. Non pas de n'avoir pas d'identité, mais de ne pouvoir s'identifier, dire 'moi' ou 'nous', de ne pouvoir prendre la forme du sujet que dans la non-identité à soi ou, si vous préférez, la différence avec soi 'avec soi' veut dire aussi 'chez soi'*" (Derrida, "L'autre cap" 16).

In the first pages of this volume we will see Montesquieu and Sade journeying in Italy, a country with a far from neutral role in the constitution of French national identity. European identity is still in the process of becoming:

Le très vieux sujet de l'identité culturelle en général (avant la guerre, on aurait peut-être parlé de l'identité "spirituelle"), le très vieux sujet de l'identité européenne a certes l'antiquité vénérable d'un thème épuisé. Mais ce "sujet" garde peut être un corps vierge. Son nom ne masquerait-il pas quelque chose qui n'a pas encore de visage? Nous nous demandons dans l'espoir, la crainte et le tremblement à quoi va ressembler ce visage. Ressemblera-t-il encore? Et à celui de quelle *persona* que nous croyons connaître, Europe? Et si sa ressemblance avait les traits de l'avenir, échappera-t-elle à la monstruosité? (Derrida, "L'autre cap" 12)

If it is, indeed, a question of "monstrosity" here, of disparate

pieces collated to form a “monster” that would conform to the eighteenth-century definition, then the challenge of such a patchwork in political and cultural terms is to make it function harmoniously as a unified entity—enough to grant it some degree of longevity, or even the possibility of survival. If it is a monster profiled in the shadows of the Second World War, and the global competition of world markets is a unidirectional forced march, then the journey may indeed prove to be disastrous.

Recapitulation of Theories of Autobiography Patterned after Rousseau:

Autobiography has only been considered a literary genre since comparatively recently. In the Nineteenth Century, autobiographies were presented as a particular sort of biography: one narrated by the person that the book was about. As Yvan Lévesque asks: "Quel lecteur ne s'est pas interrogé sur le caractère autobiographique d'une oeuvre dite de fiction et d'un autre côté, n'a jamais abordé un récit autobiographique sans quelques suspicions?" (Lévesque 357). Moreover, historical disciplines do not prevent one from searching for information in literary documents. The whole aesthetic problem of mimesis is restated in a project with proposes to translate the real, or to transform the human self into a written text.

The critical tradition that was elaborated mainly during the Nineteenth Century is changing, as the notions of subject and authorship, truth and fiction, presentation and representation through language are called into question—while the ideologies implied in the writing process of any text are also being investigated. Indeed, in attempting to establish the parameters of the autobiographical genre, it is not only writing which is being examined but also the conception of identity, which has become increasingly problematic with the contributions of psychoanalysis and German philosophy. Moreover, basing all theories of autobiography on the model of Rousseau

disregards the singularity of his gesture.

In his work of 1972, Philippe Lejeune examines the constitution and internal functioning of autobiographical texts. However, he is able to explain the distinction between autobiography and novel only by recourse to what he calls "the autobiographical pact," a sort of contract between author and reader warranted by the correspondance between the "I" in the novel and the authorial signature on the cover. To the classical dictionary definitions ("life of an individual told by himself"), he adds what he calls "fioritures" (ornamentations): "DEFINITION: Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité" (Lejeune, *Pacte* 14). But he finally questions this definition because while it is empirical, it also strives for a dogmatic status. He will ultimately reject it for the only concordance between the narrator and the signature of the book. As Lejeune himself points out, even the autobiographical "I" is problematic, because there are autobiographies written in the third person singular. In *L'autobiographie en France*, Lejeune states that from the *Confessions* onward, autobiography becomes centered on the self, while in the 17th and 18th centuries most autobiographs wrote as if "je" were another, from an impersonal perspective (45). The question remains whether or not autobiography always necessitates such an outlook, since even Rousseau declares: "...il falloit que je disse de quel oeil, si j'étois un autre, je verrois un homme tel que je suis" (*Juge* 665) However, as opposed to Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's search for a coherent writing that properly represents his life is centered on his self rather than on God's Providence.

According to Foucault, Rousseau's *Confessions* correspond to a new conception of subjectivity which emerged at the end of the 18th Century, when legal responsibility was attached to the person of the author. For Foucault, autobiography and authorship are the simultaneous effects of a new episteme (cf. "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?").

Georges May also notes a difference between earlier autobiographies and 18th Century "memoirs," which are then only theoretically distinguished from "autobiography" (cf. "Autobiography and the Eighteenth-Century"). What May emphasizes is self-discovery, and the tendency to write texts which seek to account for a whole, coherent life. One of the reasons that May proposes for the wealth of autobiographical talent that came after Rousseau is the cultural secularization which gave rise to the possibility of modern individualism. It also opens up previously unexplored fields of enquiry: childhood, and the individual psyche as they are constitutive of identity.

Rousseau's *Confessions* do not question truth and identity at the same level as *Les rêveries*, in which Rousseau writes: "...le connois-toi toi-même du Temple de Delphes n'étoit pas une maxime si facile à suivre que je l'avois cru dans mes *Confessions*" (*Rêveries* 1024). The first "promenade" emphasizes a reflexive writing where the author writes for himself, and for the pleasure of writing.

The fifth walk insists on the pleasure he takes in establishing an endless glossary by means of his herb collection representing the island of Saint-Pierre. This glossary of Nature eradicates all thought. Typically, plenitude is achieved in the loss of selfhood, differentiations, and particularly outside the time-frame:

Mais s'il est un état où l'ame trouve une assiette assez solide pour s'y reposer tout entière et rassembler là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d'enjamber sur l'avenir; où le temps ne soit rien pour elle, où le présent dure toujours, sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession, sans aucun autre sentiment de privation ni de jouissance, de plaisir ni de peine, de desir ni de crainte que celui seul de notre existence, et que ce sentiment seul puisse la remplir tout entier; tant que cet état dure

celui qui s'y trouve peut s'appeller heureux....
(*Rêveries* 1046).

This happiness runs contrary to Rousseau's motivation in writing the *Confessions*, but it fulfills the same function of bridging the schism between past and present. Significantly, Rousseau refuses to read or write when on the island of Saint-Pierre (*Rêveries* 1042), except when collecting and classifying plants. This writing is based on the recognition of Nature's identity as a reflection of his own. Moreover, his effort to gather Nature establishes him as a centre of that very Nature.

Three distinct attitudes may be observed in the narrative voice of the *Confessions*, and these are all related to a central faith in an ultimate truth and the unavoidable coherence of that which relates to a central self—himself. The first attitude, to be found mainly in the first part on youth, is rather tyrannical, and favours the pleasure of the writer over that of the readers:

Je sais bien que le lecteur n'a pas grand besoin de savoir tout cela; mais j'ai besoin, moi, de le lui dire. Que n'osé-je lui raconter de même toutes les petites anecdotes de cet heureux âge, qui me font encore tressaillir d'aise quand je me les rappelle. Cinq ou six surtout... Composons. Je vous fais grâce des cinq, mais j'en veux une, une seule, pourvu qu'on me la laisse conter le plus longuement qu'il me sera possible, pour prolonger mon plaisir.

Si je ne cherchois que le vôtre, je pourrois choisir celle du derrière de Mlle Lamercier, qui, par une malheureuse cullebutte au bas du pré, fut étalé tout en plein devant le Roi de Sardaigne à son passage: mais celle du noyer de la terrasse est plus amusante pour moi, qui fus acteur au lieu que je ne fus que spectateur de la cullebutte. (*Confessions* 121-22)

The narrator affirms the primal importance of his desire over that of the readers, and does not hesitate to choose a story which is not only unnecessary but alienating since it will likely bore them. The validity of such a story lies in its truth alone, in the fact that it occurred to the narrator as the central object-subject of the *Confessions*. The unity of the self then assures the coherence and continuity of any digression. Meanwhile, the plural of "readers" ("les lecteurs"), deprives them of their individuality while at the same time assigning a function to them.

However, in the "quatrième promenade," the pleasure of personal recollection will be judged not only unnecessary, as it is here, but ornamental and connected to truth only loosely, if at all:

J'aimois à m'étendre sur les momens heureux de ma vie, et je les embellissois quelquefois des ornemens que de tendres regrets venoient me fournir. Je disois les choses que j'avois oubliées comme il me sembloit qu'elles avoient du être, comme elles avoient été peut être en effet, jamais au contraire de ce que je me rappellois qu'elles avoient été. (*Rêveries* 1035)

As before, the readers are here being accommodated to a point, while their desire to learn truths about Rousseau cannot be enough to maintain either their interest or, thus, to make them continue reading. Their pleasure has to be counted on, while even in the *Confessions*, Rousseau comes to find truth evasive, and relies on sincerity as the only measure of truth. This he uses as the grounds to justify some quite pleasing fabrications. Rousseau will reject this psychological truth later, regretting these supplements dictated by the "pleasure of writing" towards the end of his "Quatrième promenade":

...orner la vérité par des fables c'est en effet la defigurer.

Mais ce qui me rend plus inexcusable est la devise [que] j'avais choisie Il falloit avoir le courage et la force d'être vrai toujours en toute occasion et qu'il ne sortit jamais ni fictions ni fable d'une bouche et d'une plume qui s'étoit particulièrement consacrée à la vérité. (*Rêveries* 1039)

However, this writing before absolute truth is always in excess when compared to its object-subject of representation, and also always lacking. It necessitates endless corrections and "supplements." Derrida writes: "C'est l'oreille de l'autre qui signe" (VLB ed., *L'oreille de l'autre* 71-72). Rousseau would go so far as to say that it is silence that tells the ear's inner truth: "A mesure qu'avancé dans ma vie le lecteur prendra connaissance de mon humeur, il sentira tout cela sans que je m'appesantisse à le lui dire."¹ Not only does the reader complete the text, but the text itself also needs constant rewriting and reinterpretation, first with the *Dialogues* and then with the *Promenades*. The project of circumscribing his self demands a "supplement" from both the author and his readers. The elusive nature of truth may here depend on the possibility of representing any kind of original. And so the truth of an autobiography could only exist as a centralized network by which one is to recognize the author.

Representation will always be both more and less than the "original," since duplication is out of the question. Rousseau doubtless was aware of this factor, as the project of representing himself leads him unavoidably to defacement and alteration—the necessity to speak (about) himself as (he) would (of) another man.

The truth which is owed to the public is unattainable, as is the delimitation of the self, because the self is not totally linguistic, and thus the original always escapes verbal definition. Truth therefore relies on sympathy. It hinges on a

clear conscience in the fourth walk (*Rêveries* 80), and is but a feeling, a sensation:

Que ceux qui nient la sympathie des âmes expliquent s'ils peuvent, comment, de la première entrevue, du premier mot, du premier regard, Mme de Warens m'inspira non seulement le plus vif attachement, mais une confiance parfaite et qui ne s'est jamais démentie. (*Confessions* I: 89)

It is possible that the self can be seized in its totality only when deprived of a name, of the letters, and living in the all-encompassing present of the fall at Ménilmontant. In so far as Rousseau establishes the failure of words to represent the self, he is in agreement with Lacan in the latter's commentaries on Poe's *Purloined Letter*. Here Lacan notes that the letter is a substitute for another letter, a metaphor in fact, since the metaphor is always essentially a substitution, a displacement characteristic of language, and thus of the unconscious which functions just as language does. The unconscious is then to be understood as defining for the individual.²

In his article entitled "Autobiography as De-facement" Paul de Man reflects on the impossibility for autobiographies ever to fulfill the promise of being other than fiction, or to turn into anything other than an infinite multiplication of letters:

The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made of tropological substitutions. (922)

Rousseau ultimately bases the true self-knowledge on what he calls "sympathie des âmes." Man finds that autobiography only stresses that which is common to all texts, and indeed, what word is not interpretative or substitutive?

Truth is essentially interpretative and as such, subject to plurality. The *Confessions* are written so that "false" rumors may be eradicated by the definitive exposition of "truth," as it is revealed by a person bound to speak only the truth. And yet, truth changes during the process of writing itself, as the numerous footnotes to the *Confessions* attest. In fact, these variations may well guarantee the authenticity of the *Confessions*. The revelation of truth, bare and essential, turns into a pursuit of truth through ever-multiplying letters. Truth is always postponed. In the absence of absolute truth, there is no judgement possible, and a project of confession can only become an appeal to sympathy, to the erasure of difference, or at least of distance. Autobiography thus remains an act of self-writing akin to the epitaph to "prosopopeia" according to De Man, prosopopeia being a figure of speech by which the author lends a voice to an absentee or to an inanimate being:

To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent....that is to say eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness....As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing a voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is....the shape and sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding....a linguistic predicament, and the restauration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. (De Man 930)

* * *

Does this mean that Europe must die before it may be defined? Or that like the Phoenix, it has to end in order to begin? Or perhaps less dramatically, does it mean that Europe has to translate, displace itself from its figuration? This volume traces our emerging steps as individuals constructing a socio-political identity in autobiographical journeys.

Notes

1. Rousseau, *Les confessions* I 73-74; On the topic of non-verbal communication, see also David Marshall, *The Surprising Effect of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).
2. I am referring here to Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter* in *Ecrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 19-56,

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