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Rousseau's *Pigmalion*¹: Prelude to *The Dialogues*

In the mid-eighteenth century, a *prelude* designated a musical composition played as an introduction to a liturgical ceremony.² In this paper I shall designate *Pigmalion* as prelude to the *Dialogues* in its presence as an autobiographical endeavor ultimately realized theatrically in lyric form. As such, it precedes the public witness of the ceremony of Rousseau's life. The text of *Pigmalion* was initiated in 1762 at a time when Rousseau entered a period of exile and was not performed until March, 1770 in Lyons. As lyric prelude, the *scène lyrique Pigmalion* preceded the telling of Rousseau's life, thereby constituting both lyrical and autobiographical text. Chronologically, its performance existed prior to his reading of *The Confessions* in December, 1770. Established in tripartite form as a work of hope and of clarity, I advance the hypothesis that, in this stance and as lyric text, it supplements the *Dialogues* as work of despair and justification. In both, Rousseau's revealing of the self theatrically is of prime importance, displacing through multiple processes of iconization the arduous task of writing. As *scène lyrique* comprising the artisan, silent spectator, and sculpted marble statue, *Pigmalion* thus transposes figures of the *Dialogues* comprising the reader, Jean-Jacques and Rousseau into a work of tripolar theatrical portraiture. As spectacle, *Pigmalion* as *mise en abyme*, designates the unification of Rousseau's self, symbolically, through the creation of self as monument and construct of marble stone. The significance of marble as material suitable for monument and for the molding of the artwork cannot be discounted; nor can the troubled, aspiring gaze of the sculptor announced in the opening scene. It is the gaze which calls into question the artisan's skill. Rousseau's aspiration, like that of the artisan, is to mold a work

¹. In this paper, I shall use the orthography, "Pigmalion," to designate the edition of written text or libretto by Rousseau on which my reading is based and shall use "Pygmalion" to designate the title given to the lyric production by Rousseau, as well as the text and character of the original Greek myth.

². The French *liturgie* derived from the Latin and Greek *litourgia* was a ritual of public service to the gods described in the New Testament as the ministry of priests. Quoted from Websters Dictionary, V. Neufeldt and D. Guralnik, eds., New York, Simon & Schuster, 1988, page 790.

whole and unified, representative of the integrated self. Rousseau, in essence, achieves a theatrical status for the self in *Pigmalion*, becoming both spectator and author of the self's creation.

The personal and psychological situation surrounding *Pigmalion's* performance is revealed in the Third Dialogue. Therein Rousseau derisively denounces its 1775 performance before the prestigious *Comédie Française* "puisqu'ayant sous les yeux ses livres, tels à peu près qu'il les a composés, on n'en a pas tiré l'objection qui nous paroît si forte à l'un et à l'autre contre l'affreux caractère qu'on prête à l'Auteur; puisqu'au contraire on les a su mettre au rang de ses crimes, que la profession du foi du Vicaire est devenue un écrit impie, *L'Héloïse* un roman obscène, *Le Contrat social* un livre séditieux; puisqu'on vient de mettre à Paris *Pigmalion*, malgré lui, sur la scène, tout exprès pour exciter ce risible scandale qui n'a fait rire personne et dont nul n'a senti la comique absurdité; puisque enfin ces écrits [...] n'ont pas garanti leur auteur de la diffamation de son vivant, l'en garantiront-ils mieux après sa mort (964)."

Rousseau's ascribes to the Paris production of *Pigmalion* a *risible scandale* (ridiculous scandal) in alluding to a perceived contestation over right of authorship of its lyric. Whereas the verbal text of *Pigmalion* is first mentioned by Rousseau in a letter to Du Peyrou from Strasbourg in 1765, *Pigmalion's* musical staging, the subject of this paper, was not realized until much later.³ Not until a chance meeting in Lyons, in 1770, between Rousseau and an amateur composer, Horace Coignet, was the lyric component realized allowing *Pigmalion* its full achievement as spectacle.

Rousseau persuaded Coignet to compose a musical score to his drama, one wherein the musical phrase and declamatory text would act in unison, complementing each other as text in binary form. Coignet's account of their meeting is described as follows "Chargé de sa scène lyrique, pénétré de son sujet, je composai de suite l'ouverture [...] il fut étonné de ma facilité. Il me demanda de lui laisser faire l'*andante* entre l'ouverture et le *presto*, de même que la ritournelle des coups de marteau."⁴

³ Rousseau, en route to Berlin after having to flee the French village of Motiers, had wished to perform in that city both *Pigmalion* and an earlier work, *L'Engagement téméraire*.

⁴ Arthur Pougin, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau Musicien*, Paris, Librairie Fischbacher, 1901, page 120. Quoted from *Lyons vu de Fourvières*, Lyons, Boitel, 1833.

Rousseau's *Lettre sur l'Alceste de Gluck*⁵ cites *Pigmalion* and ideals guiding its creation as a suitable vehicle for a newly formulated *recitative* where words and music "se font entendre successivement." As cited in the letter, *scène lyrique* as genre existed as one where musical and verbal text complemented each other while progressing toward an envisioned conclusion, "où la phrase parlée est en quelque sorte annoncée et préparée par la phrase musicale."⁶

As staged lyric work, *Pigmalion* was first performed before a private audience in May, 1770 with music by Coignet and Rousseau. Yet Rousseau later sought to claim full credit for the composition to the astonishment of Coignet, a claim giving rise to scandal. In a November, 1770 letter to the *Mercure de France* Coignet countered Rousseau's claim of having authored fully the words and music "Rousseau voulant faire entendre au grand concert, un motet qu'il avait composé il y avait alors vingt ans, me chargea, à la première répétition de conduire l'orchestre. Les musiciens en prirent de l'humeur contre lui. [...] Une nombreuse réunion était allée pour l'entendre. Rousseau s'en prit aux musiciens. Le chagrin qu'il éprouva de ce mauvais succès le décida à quitter Lyons" correcting the error "Alors j'écrivis à Lacombe, rédacteur du *Mercure*, que la musique de *Pigmalion* n'était pas de Rousseau, mais que j'en devais le succès aux conseils de ce grand homme, dont la présence m'inspirait. Je me décidai à la faire graver, en donnant à Rousseau ce qui lui appartenait. Il n'en fallait pas davantage pour le refroidir à mon égard."⁷

Confirming his knowledge of music's history, Rousseau aspired to model the score of *Pigmalion* on the *melopœia* of Ancient Greece revealed in correspondence with eighteenth century music historian, Charles Burney. Described as the singing of poetry, *melopœia* had specific rules. Burney's account, after the text of the Greek theoretician,

⁵. *Alceste* by composer Christoph Willibald Gluck was first performed in Vienna in 1767 with libretto by Calzibigi and illustrated many operatic reforms espoused by Gluck. These included a return to the natural origins of opera, dispensing with pure musicianship and, instead, reinforcing the dramatic situation. In this full-scale opera, Gluck dispensed with castrati, common to eighteenth century Italian *opera seria*, and had the work performed by an *opera buffa* troupe using characters from common classes. Cited in *Grove Dictionary of Music*, ed. A. Holden with N. Kenyon and A. Walsh "Christoph Willibald Gluck" by David Butchart, London, Viking, pages 370 to 379.

⁶. *Fragments d'observations. Sur l'Alceste italien de monsieur le chevalier Gluck*, page 448.

⁷. Account of Horace Coignet in *Lyons vu de Fourvières*, Lyons, Boitel, 1833. Quoted in Arthur Pougin, page 121.

Aristedis Quintilianus, cites curious "moral distinctions" used by the Greeks in its composition.⁸ For *melopœia* to achieve its full effect, a composition was composed in one of three modes including the *dithyrambic* or Bacchanal, the *nomis*, consecrated to Apollo, and the *tragic*. In turn the chosen mode corresponded to the musical instruments used. The *andante* portion of the ritornello composed by Rousseau in the key of D minor modulating to C, was assigned to the *nomis* mode for wind instruments of the highest register.

The story of the sculptor Pygmalion had been treated many times throughout the Western literary tradition since Ovid. In Greek mythology, Pygmalion was an ancient king of Cyprus who fell in love with Aphrodite and, upon her refusal to grant him favors, created an ivory statue in her likeness. The Pygmalion legend is recounted in *Metamorphoses* X wherein the poet Ovid's obsession with love and feminine psychology caused him to portray the artist's love for his statue in morbid, pathological terms.⁹ Ovid, whose verses tended to be satirical, reconstructed the myth by causing the statue to come to life as a mortal. Like Orpheus, Pygmalion was given the power to bring to life dead matter, symbolizing the coming to life of the art work. More importantly, serving as antecedent to Rousseau's version, Pygmalion was conceived as sculptor, not as king, who could escape from reality into creative art. The representation of the statue's coming to life through the toil of the artist is enhanced by Rousseau thematically in his *scène lyrique*.

Whereas in Ovid's tale Venus rewards Pygmalion by bringing to life Galatea, in Rousseau's *scène*, the figurative act of naming the self conferred by posterity is brought to life through the creation of the artwork. This process results in a spectacularization of the autobiographical moment conferred through processes of staging. I posit that the theatrical representation of self is Rousseau's affirmation and is created using the artist figure, the spectator, and the statue as triple points of portraiture wherein the self on one level betokens a conversation about the self on other levels.

My reading of this lyric work thus argues for the existence of a "theatrically supplemented rhetoric." As in the *Dialogues* wherein Rousseau constructs a theatrical "scene à trois personnages," *Pigmalion* as libretto and its lyric performance are constructed as a scene wherein

⁸ Charles Burney, *A General History of Music From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (1789), with Critical and Historical Notes by Frank Mercer, New York, Dover, 1957, page 69.

⁹ See Karl K. Hulley and Stanley T. Vandersall, eds. *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1970, page 460.

la voix publique, indicated in the *Dialogues* by the figure of *le Francais*, is designated by the unseen presence of the spectator. Whereas, in the *Dialogues*, the character of Rousseau directs the conversation with *le Francais* in defense of Jean-Jacques, in *Pigmalion* as text and as staged lyric work, Jean-Jacques as workman/sculptor refashions the self of Rousseau as one conferred to posterity in the eyes of the spectator. Thus, the epiphany of self cited by De Man is supplemented through the dimension of interiority realized as lyric performance. This dimension of interiority, musically revealed, both enlarges and supplements the pathos of self signified as the creative process, causing a transformation to occur on multiple levels toward an achievement of monumentality.

In his *scène*, Rousseau affirms through the figure of the artist the *creation of self in stone* (itself of nature) as monument achieved through multiple layers of being. In *Pigmalion*, artifice is thereby allowed to triumph causing an illusory victory of appearance. (In Rousseau's theory, clearly stated in the *Second Discourse*, appearance [*paraître*] opposes being [*être*] as the natural self to the artificial and privileges the former. The natural self, through its immersion in nature, is the more favored self and is healed and uplifted.)

In terms of a decisive chronology, the text of *Pigmalion*, as De Man has written, immediately follows Rousseau's major literary achievement. Thus, it accords full presence to self-experience and self-witness. If one admits with De Man that acute self-understanding is not incompatible with pathological misinterpretations of the self's relationship to others,¹⁰ then Rousseau's verbal text alone can be seen as a fortification and enshrinement of self-love before increasingly ambivalent personal and social structures. Therein, the interior voice of the sculptor, Pygmalion, reified in the libretto "l'entretien des peintres et des poètes est sans attrait pour moi; la louange et la gloire n'élevent plus mon âme; les éloges de ceux qui en recevront de la postérité ne me touchent plus"¹¹, is not unlike Rousseau's state of mind revealed in his first correspondence to Malesherbes (January, 1762) echoing an attitude of distress directed toward worldly success "J'ai un cœur trop sensible à d'autres attachements pour l'être si fort à l'opinion publique; j'aime trop mon plaisir et mon indépendance pour être esclave de la vanité."¹²

¹⁰. Paul De Man, "Self," *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, page 163.

¹¹. *Pigmalion*, libretto, page 5.

¹². *Lettres à Malesherbes*, page 1130.

Thus as *scène lyrique*,¹³ and in its status as spectacle, *Pygmalion* contains multiple levels of reading which represent to the spectator an idealized unity of self ascending from conflict. Lyrically, Rousseau enhances this idealized vision of clarity through a variety of means. First, the psychology of the protagonist, Pygmalion, is revealed as symphonic fragments performed alternatively with intervals of silence and verbal text. This juxtaposition of music, silence, and verbal text subliminally reflects the unconscious and its fears,¹⁴ linking them to the conscious self and its actions. For Rousseau, the hybrid nature of *Pygmalion* as *scène lyrique* comprising verbal text, stage directions, and symphonic fragments serves to portray the interior self of Rousseau at the time of its writing to the spectator.

Secondly, the alternance of symphonic music with text is used to reveal through suspended moments of discordant sound, sudden variation in volume, and uses of the minor key, the self's confrontation and seeking after the sublime sentiment as harbinger of immortality. Thus Rousseau's composition of the *andante* fragment of the ritornello in the key of D minor, associated during the eighteenth century with that of the funeral dirge, is of significance as is his composition of the segment wherein the sculptor first chisels the work of stone. This latter gesture of chiseling, staged, may be perceived as signifying Pygmalion's seeking to control the passage of time toward eternity.

Finally, the framing device achieved by juxtaposing melodic key with text, supplemented by segments of silence, results in a deliberate alienation of musical sound from verbal text, signifying the uniqueness and supplementarity of Jean-Jacques-as-sculptor and Rousseau-as-artwork. Rousseau's uncertainty during this chronological period, reflected through the above-mentioned musical processes enhances the complementarity of music as reflection of nature opposing verbal text, symbolizing the sculptor's dialogue with the artwork. According to this interpretive schema, music may be said to enliven the story of Pygmalion just as life awakens or enlivens the statue's coldness or deadness. The totality of performance, in causing music to enliven language, thereby

¹³. Rousseau's denomination, *scène lyrique*, Pougin recounts, would today imply the idea of the cantata form or of melodrama, wherein purely symphonic music is either accompanied by or occurs in alternance with spoken text. Pougin cites Beethoven's *Egmont* and Mendelsohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* as similar examples. (Pougin, page 122)

¹⁴. As musical text, *Pygmalion* was harbinger of the future trend in opera of adhering to a more psychological, interior voice; it enacted Rousseau's belief that music expressed various shades of feeling which make possible a "coming alive" of the art work.

establishes a chain of oppositions between the artwork and self-presentation as the artwork is aggrandized and deified, the sculptor's self is diminished. Conversely, in alluding to *Pigmalion's* final scene, as the work of art is abandoned to the despair of reexperiencing the human condition, the self represented simply as Jean-Jacques is deified through being human and of the earth.

The final public representation of *Pigmalion* by *La Comédie Française* occurred in the period immediately preceding Rousseau's offering of the *Dialogues*¹⁵ on the altar of Notre Dame, the period when Rousseau falsely claimed full authorship of the entirety of its musical composition¹⁶ while angrily denouncing its staging in Paris as an attempt by outsiders to persecute him. He therefore refused to witness its performance. In observing the stage directions of the libretto *Pigmalion*, transformed as lyric spectacle, the contours of Rousseau's paranoia can be perceived through movements conceived as ambivalence and vacillation, enhanced by the lyric thus promoting the use of indeterminacy as means. As process, lyric indeterminacy specularized or reinforced the presence of Rousseau's paranoid delusions. Lasting from the text's first writing until well after its staged production in Lyons, these moments of fear, realized theatrically through the *dedoublement* of musical and linguistic frames of reference, allowed deliberately blurred articulations of narrative to be represented.

Although Rousseau sought control of all aspects of its production, the contours of paranoia or self division intermingled throughout its text were amplified as multiple points of reference through stage directions alluding to the interior state of the artist, in turn reflected in the gestures of flight and of exile of Rousseau himself. In the libretto, the opening scene is described "Le théâtre représente un atelier de sculpteur. Sur les côtés on voit des blocs de marbre, des groupes, des statues ébauchés[...] L'image de la statue voilée se dresse ainsi."¹⁷ In the background a single statue stands which is shrouded; hidden by the veil,

¹⁵. Rousseau's *Dialogues* were published posthumously in 1778.

¹⁶. Rousseau's request that Coignet write twenty-four of the work's twenty-six orchestral partitions elicited a response from the latter which stated "Je dois cependant à l'exacte vérité annoncer que dans les vingt-six ritournelles qui composent la musique de ce drame, il y en a deux que M. Rousseau a faites lui-même [...] par la difficulté de représenter ce spectacle, je déclare que l'*andante* de l'ouverture et que le premier morceau de l'interlocution qui caractérise le travail de Pygmalion appartiennent à M. Rousseau (quoted in Arthur Pougin, page 122)."

¹⁷. Quoted by Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La Transparence et l'obstacle*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, page 90.

the projected image is invisible. Stage directions, presented in the libretto, focus on the interior state of the artist, "Pigmalion, assis et accoudé, rêve dans l'attitude d'un homme inquiet et triste; puis se levant tout-à-coup, il prend sur une table les outils de son art, va donner par intervalle quelques coups de ciseau sur quelques unes de ses ébauches, se recule, et regarde d'un air mécontent et découragé."¹⁸

The posture of Pygmalion is thus one which indicates melancholy. Although not given a proper name, the term *génie*, prevalent in the late-eighteenth century, directs the opening monologues away from the mood of melancholy toward the view of the self as exceptional person. "O mon Génie! ou es-tu? mon Talent, qu'es-tu devenu? Tout mon feu s'est éteint; mon imagination s'est glacée; le marbre sort froid de mes mains. Pigmalion ne fait plus des Dieux Tu n'es qu'un vulgaire artiste. Vils instrumens, qui n'êtes plus ceux de ma gloire, allez, ne déshonorez point mes mains!"¹⁹

From the text, Rousseau as author appears to identify with the character, Pygmalion, carefully constructing the recreated self from marble stone, easily fragmented, and thus risking loss. These varying states of mind indicated through the stage notes act as supplement to embody a hoped-for unity and coherence on the part of Rousseau/Pygmalion, one reflecting a possibility of being, one yet unfulfilled at its writing. For example, when Pygmalion first perceives the image behind the veil, the quest for self truth visualized through the stage direction as fear is emblemized by the phrase, "Je ne sais quelle émotion j'éprouve en touchant ce voile! une frayeur me saisit; je crois toucher au sanctuaire de quelque divinité."²⁰

As prelude to *The Dialogues*, Rousseau both creates and represents in *Pigmalion* the beginnings of a self in crisis, presented from the point of view of the relationship between the self, the created or recreated self, and the visualization of this process of creation, witnessed by peers as lyric spectacle. As in the *Dialogues*, tripolarity is present but is theatrically and lyrically objectified. Throughout, the libretto prefers a dialect of opposites such as those of warmth versus coldness, of the natural versus the artificial self, and artistic aspiration versus humility, projecting an aspiration for coherence or unity of self on the part of Rousseau, one which he wishes his spectator to know as peer and as witness. Thus, as a result of the final scene of contemplation, Pygmalion

¹⁸. *Pigmalion*, libretto, pages 3 and 4.

¹⁹. *Pigmalion*, libretto, page 4.

²⁰. *Pigmalion*, libretto page 8.

discards his tools, abandoning the artwork, as though Rousseau, himself, has projected theatrically the questioning of perfectibility embodied in the artwork's creation. This questioning, revealed through a visual landscape of symbols privileges a favored Rousseauian term, *revolution*, designating profound transformation or change.

In the final scene, Pygmalion's interior monologue achieves presence as oratory reflecting Rousseau's thoughts on posterity at the time of its writing. The moral and social issues of the alienated state present in the musical-theatrical representation of text and *mise en scène* are visualized as the desire to mold from nature an artwork representative of the unified self. Displaced in his studio, the sculptor Pygmalion thus enacts on stage a *mise en abyme* or representation of Rousseau's life and work, a phenomenon constructed, like the self, of multiple layers of being.

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