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The Lyric Self, the Performative Self Rousseau and the Ancient Myths

Si l'antiquité de Rousseau est à l'évidence une antiquité diverse et plurielle, reconstruit et pour une part mythique, elle n'en joue pas moins, dans ses écrits, une fonction déterminante. Elle Constitue dans son univers personnel une référence majeure.

— Yves Touchefeu

In describing the universe of the self, Rousseau refers in the third *Dialogue* to a mysterious “habitant d’une autre sphère où rien ne ressemble à celle-ci” (*OC* 1: 934). Likewise, in an earlier text, *Le Persifleur*, he embraces such themes as *dissemblable* to describe the self’s alienation wherein he states: “Rien n’est si dissemblable à moi que moi-même [...cette variété singulière] est telle dans mon esprit qu’elle influe de temps à autre jusque sur mes sentiments” (1: 1108).¹ Such interpretations of self described in these and other autobiographical texts embrace a panoply of oppositions wherein Rousseau, in describing the self, creates a binary system which opposes being to appearance, sensitivity to rationality, and virtue to fallibility. Within this system the self’s own uniqueness and sincerity are constantly called into question along with that of its peers. Using as model the community of Antiquity espoused by Plato wherein each individual transports his own unique individual self into a common unity, or community, Rousseau proposes that the self is a being apart and is, likewise, composed of many facets. Nevertheless, it is able to surrender its uniqueness toward the common good of compassionate humanity. Although Rousseau’s aim depicts the truth of his being as transparent, natural and thus unified throughout his writings, he subsumes his claim of unity within an identity which is theatricalized. This identity valorizes the public self as performer, one able to display or theatricalize a more intimate interiorized self of sentiment before a public composed of spectators and readers.

Eigeldinger remarks how Rousseau seeks recourse in the imagination, in the use of history and, in following, of mythology, to create an “histoire hypothétique de la genèse ou des genèses qu’il inventa en marge des obstacles et des contraintes de la réalité contemporaine, celle qui se prête à une idéalisation”² Asserting the self through created, represented dualism aspiring toward unity, Rousseau represents the self through the

intermediary of myth. How this created identity is not stable but is transformed from mythology to mythology, from the innocent lover, Narcissus, to the world-weary Pygmalion, to the enraptured Daphnis of the erotic poem by Longus, is the subject of this paper. In lyric works, defined as those works written by Rousseau wherein the *je* of lyric poetry or of the musical phrase exists as embodiment of sentiment to play an intrinsic role, the truth of the individual self is continually being created anew as representation. Rousseau's earliest mention of mythology as vehicle to fathom and the self as lyric entity is seen in the play, *Narcisse*, written in 1749. His use of mythology as vehicle for self-transformation progresses consistently through the creation of later operas *Pygmalion*³ and *Daphnis et Chloé* (Eigeldinger 49).

The idealization afforded by a recreated, staged, self appears in Rousseau's writings as a structure which is performative. As such, performance offers a mirror image of Rousseau's self in its reflecting of actual life events occurring at the moment of representation: "Le monde idéal s'appuie sur le réel et s'en nourrit mais il le dépasse en se rapprochant de la nature, en se composant d'une société choisie" (Eigeldinger 93). Rousseau's knowledge of Latin, his translations of the writings of Ovid into Latin, or French, his readings of the Roman poets Homer and Longus, allow him to address a mythologisation of self both explicitly and implicitly through calling forth real and imagined events. Through performance Rousseau embodies the *lyrisme naturel* as emblem of his sincerity; as such he sets forth the lyric phrase in a manner evocative of values of the purer, natural self in order to recapture a healing presence associated with nature which, as he states in the second *Discours*, is lost and has to be recovered. From this perspective, the lyric phrase portends the linking of the locus of nature to the position of melody in the musical phrase and, subsequently, to a morality of the affections in Rousseau the individual. The performative text may thus be described as being conceived from an interior vantage point, creating a force which is both theatrical, in its being staged, and autobiographical, in its reflecting the most interior realms of self-knowledge. As both theater and autobiography, the performative transcends the written text and invites interpretation both by author and reader. Whereas lyric can be defined as a category of representation wherein music is an intrinsic intellectual and aesthetic element, autobiography, enhanced by the musical element of the lyric mode, becomes a focal point for the expression of essential emotional and rational values. Thus the performative as construct sustains the autobiographical gesture, adding decisive force to its capacity to enhance the self, further empowering it as monument through use of the archetypal myth.

The first of three myths I have chosen to examine is the Greek myth of Narcissus. Rousseau's *Narcisse*, written when he was eighteen, can be linked to the writing and staging of his *scène lyrique*, *Pygmalion*. At different junctures of his literary career, Rousseau recasts the myths of Narcissus and Pygmalion to reveal an awakening or healing of the self through narcissism and, secondly, to affect the transcendence of self through creation of the work of art. As background, the narrative of *Narcisse* is modeled on the Greek myth of a youth possessed of incredible beauty who rejects the nymph Echo who, in turn, pleads with him, using his own words, to love her. The goddess, Artemis, angry at his rejection, causes him to fall in love with himself, the image of a reflection in a pond. When he desperately kills himself with a knife, the Narcissus flower grows from the blood-stained pond, symbolizing redemption. In a similar manner, Rousseau's lyric work posits the portrait of Valère as symbol of Narcissus. Painted by Valère's sister, Lucinde, to look as though it were a woman (in an effort to cure her brother of ridiculous mannerisms), the portrait becomes the object of his affections. Falling in love with his portrait, his feminine likeness, preferring a self-love to the charms of his fiancée, Angélique, Valère seeks to reconcile the divided self, to discover his truest nature despite irreconcilable obstacles. In the opening scene, Lucinde remarks: "Valerie est, par sa délicatesse et par l'affectation de sa parure, une espèce de femme cachée sous des habits d'homme, et ce portrait ainsi travesti, semble moins le déguiser que le rendre à son état naturel" (2: 977). In Rousseau's play, Angélique skillfully employs two strategies to win back Valère, first by feigning indifference and secondly, by pretending to know, herself, the "lady" in the portrait.

Angélique swears to Valère that he must choose. The act of choosing, in turn, causes self-awakening. As such, Valère's recognition elicits awakening leading, in turn, to self-probing:

ANGÉLIQUE. Vous devriez d'autant moins méconnaître cet objet que vous avez eu avec lui le commerce le plus intime, et qu'assurément on ne vous accusera pas de l'avoir négligé. Ôtez à cette tête cette parure étrange que votre sœur y a fait ajouter...

VALÈRE. Ah! que vois-je?

MARTON. La chose n'est-elle pas claire? vous voyez le portrait et voilà l'original. (1: 1016).

The creation of *Narcisse* at Chambéry between 1732 and 1740 foreshadows an early consciousness of dissimulation on Rousseau's part. In turn, to feign, to dissimulate, and to prevaricate all belie the fundamental division of being and appearance which appears as cornerstone of his mature phi-

losophy. When Rousseau arrived in Paris, he brought the play which he termed *une mauvaise pièce* and is said to have walked out in the middle of its performance. Despite the fact that it won the praise of Marivaux and La Noue, accomplished theater professionals, Rousseau's views are more clearly stated in the preface, composed in 1751. There, the mature Rousseau defends his position as playwright and critic of the arts, by stating that the divided self or duality of which he is accused will serve as a commentary on his century:

Ils prétendent que je ne pense pas un mot des vérités que j'ai soutenues [...]. Il me semble, a moi, que ceux qui m'accusent si témérairement de parler contre ma pensée, ne se font pas eux-mêmes une grand scrupule de parler contre la leur: car ils n'ont assurément rien trouvé dans mes écrits ni dans ma conduite qui ait dû leur inspirer cette idée. (1: 961)

As *scène lyrique*, *Pygmalion's* use of the Greek myth to fathom the self of artistic creation exemplifies his psychological plight at the time of its creation. Written as Rousseau is fleeing Paris, it posits the reader, sculptor and sculpture as triple points of portraiture. In Rousseau's conception of the *scène*, the statue stands as embodiment of the idealized self, whereas reader and artisan each reinforce the subjectivity of the creative act through the act of judgement. Using as basis the major Neo-Platonist doctrine concerning transcendence of physical form through the spirit, Rousseau's text and lyric enactment of *Pygmalion* likens self unity as aspiration which is, in turn, wedded to the artwork as creation. Duality and consequent merging of matter and spirit are conveyed in the following lines:

PYGMALION. Que l'âme faite pour animer un tel corps doit être belle! [...] Quels désirs osé-je former? Quels vœux insensés! qu'est-ce que je sens?... Ô ciel! le voile de l'illusion tombe, et je n'ose voir dans mon cœur: j'aurais trop à m'en indigner. (2: 1227).

Self-creation as performative process is revealed succinctly throughout *Pygmalion's* several musical partitions, each evoking the sought-for ideal of balance of word and musical tone, each existing with the other in supplementary form. Rousseau was not the first to have rendered the fable as performance (among others, the librettist La Motte had used the fable as text for an opera put to music by Michel de la Barre, and the composer, Jean Philippe Rameau, had written a version performed in 1748). Nevertheless, the importance of the myth did strike him as early as 1762 when he was chased out of France and forced to find refuge in the Jura. Both poet and musician, Rousseau created with *Pygmalion* a work which at first reflected music and harmony by means of a series of discreet symbols writ-

ten in the margins of the text, almost as though he believed that simply on the basis of the text and sparse stage directions that every discriminating listener could add his own harmony to it. The original words of the libretto with sparse musical indications were fitted into a small envelope to be sent to the great Italian librettist Metastasio for his comments and approval. Nevertheless, in 1762, the actual manuscript of *Pygmalion* was left behind in Neuchâtel among many other hitherto unpublished things which Rousseau initially considered as of little worth (Jansen 49).

The Pygmalion myth in both medieval and late eighteenth-century versions, whether as staged play or opera, bestowed on mortal man a supernatural presence. Artists looked at the fable as the earliest stage or representation wherein the figure of the sculptor, as mortal man, was made worthy of acclaim on account of his wisdom and bravery. The staging in 1770 of *Pygmalion* as lyric *scène* encompassed the ideal of textual form, of symphonic form dialectically responding to a verbal dimension. According to Plato, the substance of the dialogue, the truth of *ideas* or forms, could only be perceived by reason. In Rousseau's *Pygmalion* the enshrinement of self, conceived as ideal, was achieved only through the rational shaping of the marble image rendered as musical and verbal text through Rousseau's skill as arranger.

In reply to a friend who suggested that he consider composing music to the work, Rousseau responded: "Vraiment, s'il ne l'a pas fait, c'est qu'il n'en était pas capable. Mon petit Faiseur ne peut enfler que les pipeaux; il y faudrait un grand Faiseur. Je ne connais que M. Gluck en état d'entreprendre cet ouvrage, et je voudrais bien qu'il daignât s'en charger" (quoted in Tiersot 162). In *Pygmalion*, and in the fragments of *Daphnis et Chloé* which followed, echoes of Rousseau's musical critique and admiration of the work of Gluck are present. It is the dramatic Gluck referred to by Rousseau in his correspondence on *Alceste* ("C'était à l'auteur des paroles de renforcer, par une marche graduée, la chaleur et l'intérêt. Celui de la musique n'a pu rendre les affections de ses personnages que dans le même ordre et au même degré que le drame les lui présentait" [5: 449]) that is present in *Pygmalion*, whereas in *Daphnis et Chloé*, Rousseau's last opera, it is the influence of a later Gluck, creator of graceful, lyric operas as *Echo und Narcisse* (1779) and *Armide* (1777).

In the rendering of the myth of *Daphnis et Chloé*, translated into French from the writings of Longus, a second century Roman poet, Rousseau embraced a unity of lyric form undaunted by the experimentation that had characterized *Pygmalion* and conceived in more plenitude than Rousseau's earlier *intermède*, *Le Devin du village*. *Daphnis et Chloé* consisted originally of a prologue followed by two acts for which Rousseau wrote all of

the music and for which he wrote words for the second act duo and partition. In Rousseau's verses for the work's second act, the singing voice is privileged as reward for love; Rousseau evokes the antique idyll of Greece in the Golden Age, set forth by the father of the *pastorale*, Theocratic.

In the "Avis des éditeurs" for the posthumously published manuscript, it is written that the music suggests the song of the younger shepherd through florid lyric passages fraught with *roulades* and *cadences*. In contrast, the song of the older Philetas is reduced to the simplicity of a romance. The singing match, characteristic of the Greek *pastorale*, and the longing for lost perfection idealized as songs symbolize the personal dilemma faced by Rousseau. In following strophes, Rousseau depicts a lyric rivalry as singing match. In the following verses, the younger shepherd and the older Philetas vie for the hand of Aphné, the shepherdess.

La musique doit seconder cette idée, et donner au chant du premier Berger un style fleuri, avec roulades et cadences. Philetas au contraire se réduit, tant pour les paroles que pour la musique, à la simplicité de la Romance. Aphné, juge entre ces deux rivaux, dit au premier, qu'à la ville elle ne doute pas qu'il n'obtient le prix, mais que sa main est pour Philetas.

Revealed as a series of fragments loosely comprising a prologue and two acts the original composition and arrangement were written by Rousseau during a period in his life when, disturbed and upset, he again returned to his wife. Jansen writes of a series of meetings which took place in Paris between Rousseau and the poet, Curancez, meetings during which Rousseau himself participated in the singing of melodies reminiscent of the opera lyric (419). Yet once assembled, its parts arranged by Rousseau, the project was abruptly abandoned. In the "Avis des éditeurs," Rousseau was blamed for an apparent lack of poetic text: "Nous avons d'abord imaginé d'engager l'auteur des paroles de ce fragment à finir son poème, et de charger ensuite un compositeur [...]. Il paraît que M. Rousseau, dominé par son goût pour la musique, éprouvait dans certains moments le besoin de composer, et ne donnait pas à l'auteur des paroles le temps de travailler sa matière (4). In the scene from the opera wherein the shepherdess Aphné remains true to her lover, she is implored not to swear in the presence of the god, Pan lest their love follow the example of Romeo and Juliet (Jansen 419–20). Thus, mythology is present and supplements narrative, revealing on the part of Rousseau a necessary conjunction of writing and desire. The opera allows Rousseau the pleasure of renouncing youth in anticipation of old age while nostalgically looking back. Rousseau's childhood memories of song are thus cast in the lyric romance wherein Philetas reflects nostalgically upon lost youth:

Je ne suis ni jeune ni beau,
 J'ai peu de talent pour plaire;
 Mais l'amour de son flambeau
 M'anime encore et m'eclairc.

Je ne mets dans mes façons
 D'autre appât que la droiture;
 Je ne mets dans mes chansons
 Que l'accent de la nature.

Si quelque ton de douceur
 Dans mes chants se fait entendre,
 Tout mon art est dans mon cœur:
 Il m'est venu sans l'apprendre.

Belle Aphné, je t'offre en ce jour
 Tout ce que j'ai dans ma puissance:
 Un cœur tendre, un fidele amour
 Et la gaité de l'innocence. [...] (2: 1165).

In Rousseau's last lyric work, the joining together of multiple selves is conceived in the utopic setting of the *pastorale*, bestowed from Ancient Greece. The fictionalized imitation of rural life, the pastoral reinscribed by Rousseau is artfully transformed into emblems of self-definition representing, in turn, the country, peace, and individual worth. Thus, Rousseau personalized the pastoral in the lyric and arrangement of *Daphnis et Chloé* to reflect the tranquillity and peace at life's end. In *Narcisse*, and in operatic works, *Pygmalion*, and *Daphnis et Chloé*, the construction and context of the performative self is represented, first as androgynous, composed of masculine and feminine polarities; second as transcendent, evoking immortality of the artist; and thirdly, as striving toward balance and wholeness, represented through musical-verbal interplay coupled with the conjunction of the external world with the interior realm of sentiment. The varied uses of the performative as representation thus cause Rousseau's staged lyric works to embrace the contours of autobiography, serving the self as monument thereby causing the *self* to become vehicle for mythic articulation. In this paper, I have shown how three lyric works foreshadow a representational strategy, through which Rousseau theatricalizes the "self," foregrounding its contours within a preferred framework which is lyric. Within this strategy, the interior self belonging to the passions or sentiment, represented by and as song, becomes most privileged. The musical lyric and poetic *je* allow Rousseau a ploy — specifically, to reveal as lyric

representation the true, innermost self as one both directed by sentiment and morally concerned.

Consequently, the lyric stage is transformed by Rousseau to cast the self as both represented and representor. As the self which is represented, Rousseau achieves subliminally truths he will later convey verbally. As the self which is representer, Rousseau conveys through the human voice a superior power, conceived both as organ of interiority and of joining together with humanity as a whole. As such, contours of lyric works resemble contours of autobiographical ones.

Treatments of the myths *Narcisse*, *Pygmalion*, and *Daphnis and Chloé*, rendered as lyric performative acts, serve in Rousseau's writings as self portrayals continually in transition. Their purpose is twofold: first, the representation of Rousseau the individual appears as belonging to the corpus of mankind, and, second, the apparatus of the stage is used to represent Rousseau the individual as multifaceted, possessing both intellect and sentiment, yet above all exceptional, and worthy of approbation.

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Notes

¹*Le Persifleur*, written in Paris in 1749 and first published by Dupeyrou at Geneva in 1781, was originally conceived by Rousseau as a pamphlet. It is regarded as one of the first indications of self-portraiture by Rousseau scholars while not seminal to the autobiographical project seen as a whole (*OC* 1: 1108).

²*Pygmalion*, written in 1761 in Môtiers, and not staged until 1770 in Lyon, is Rousseau's second performed opera and represents his attempt to integrate spoken monologue, instrumental music, and silence. In *The Attraction of the Contrary*, Walter Rex states that *Pygmalion's* juxtaposition of music and text may serve as the antecedent modern melodrama.

³Rousseau's final opera, *Daphnis et Chloé*, contained music by Rousseau and lyrics by Rousseau and Curancez. The first act, sketch of the prologue, and various pieces to be included in a second act were published in 1779.

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